READING NATHALIE SARRAUTE THROUGH THE LENS OF JEAN BAUDRILLARD:
CHALLENGING CONSUMERS AND CLICHÉS

by

Ksenia Cheinman

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2009

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(French)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

June 2011

© Ksenia Cheinman, 2011
Abstract

Jean Baudrillard chimed the bell announcing the postmodern death of the subject and the commodification of culture and language at the same time as Nathalie Sarraute was addressing these issues while experimenting with the formal qualities of the *Nouveau Roman*.

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how two works of Nathalie Sarraute, namely the novel *Tu ne t’aimes pas* (1989) and the play *C’est beau* (1975), textualize resistance to the consumer society that they are staging as framed by Baudrillard’s seminal text *La Société de consommation* (1970). The first chapter, dealing with *Tu ne t’aimes pas*, examines the nature of consumers and by juxtaposing “Consumables” and “Inconsumables” illustrates how Sarraute reanimates the individual through multiplicity. The second chapter, focusing on *C’est beau*, explores clichés as well as the social tendency to linguistic conformism and simplification which in turn are challenged through abstraction and “thick description”.

I prove that, through an aesthetic of undecidability, Sarraute succeeds in reviving the individual and restoring language from piles of platitudes in a way that the critical dialogues carried on in her writing extend to the present day and into the future.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ iv
Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 1
1 Chapter: Reanimation of the Individual (*Tu ne t’aimes pas*) ................................................... 11
   1.1 The Consumables ......................................................................................................................... 13
       1.1.1 Narcissism ............................................................................................................................... 13
       1.1.2 Personalization ....................................................................................................................... 23
   1.2 The Inconsumables ...................................................................................................................... 29
       1.2.1 Multiplicity of voices ............................................................................................................. 30
       1.2.2 Voice of reason ..................................................................................................................... 36
2 Chapter: Restoration and Reconstruction of Language (*C’est beau*) .................................... 52
   2.1 Clichés ........................................................................................................................................... 53
       2.1.1 C’est beau ............................................................................................................................... 55
       2.1.2 Social discourse of conformism ............................................................................................ 60
   2.2 Thick Description ......................................................................................................................... 69
       2.2.1 Abstraction and extension ................................................................................................... 70
       2.2.2 Accumulation and decentrement ......................................................................................... 73
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 81
Works Cited ....................................................................................................................................... 90
Acknowledgements

As Dr. Sarkonak has mentioned to me during one of our thesis-meetings, it is important to “keep the eyes on the prize” or in other words, to imagine the thesis physically completed, as a neat, solid stack of paper, ready to be submitted. But it has not always been easy and this is why it is important to acknowledge all the invaluable support that has helped make my thesis transform from virtuality into reality.

I offer my enduring gratitude to the faculty, staff, and my fellow students at the UBC, who have inspired me to continue my work in this field. The SSHRC Master’s Fellowship has also been indispensible in facilitating my graduate studies and I am very appreciative of this generous funding.

I owe particular thanks to Dr. Sarkonak, who has been most supportive throughout the whole process and encouraged me with a good measure of intellectual and constructive advice as well as humour. I thank Dr. Alain-Michel Rocheleau for giving relevance to my work and for the insightful discussion we had on the contemporary pertinence of the issues explored in my thesis. I also thank Dr. Laroussi for providing me with an opportunity to consider my work from a different perspective and to reconsider some of the strategies that I have been so used to as well as for pointing out other paths for theoretical reflection. I would also like to acknowledge the wonderful insight offered by Dr. Godfrey during my presentation of the thesis in the research seminar.

This list would not be complete without the expression of gratitude to my parents, whose care and support have always been crucial to my success, and to my fiancé, who constantly listened and helped me to steadily move along in my writing process without losing the enthusiasm.
Introduction

Il n’est […] pas paradoxal de soutenir que dans nos sociétés ‘affluentes’, l’abondance est perdue 1, et qu’elle ne sera restituée par un surcroît de productivité à perte de vue, par la libération de nouvelles forces productives. Puisque la définition structurelle de l’abondance et de la richesse est dans l’organisation sociale, seule une révolution de l’organisation sociale et des rapports sociaux pourrait l’inaugurer. 2

– Jean Baudrillard, La Société de consommation

Nathalie Sarraute was born Natacha Tcherniak in Ivanovo, Russia in 1900. She spent her childhood years alternating between France and Russia, until finally settling down in Paris in 1909. Even though she traveled extensively throughout her lifetime, Sarraute remained faithful to France, which became her true home. She passed away in Paris in 1999, having lived through the entire 20th century, experiencing different cultures, social values, and events that have shaped the people of her time.

Unobtrusively, Sarraute noted her personal analysis and reflections through experimental writing, perhaps without fully realizing what impact it might have. As a writer, she obtained recognition very slowly, finally receiving the Prix international de littérature for her novel Les Fruits d’or in 1964 after many of her previously published works went unnoticed or even were rejected by the critics. This lack of general acclaim, however, did not bother Sarraute, as her main aim was not to become a bestselling author by producing what was popular but rather for her writing to be appreciated for its innovative, unique quality. This is why when Jean-Yves Tadié inquired what Sarraute would like him to say in the preface to the Pléiade edition of her work, she simply replied: “Dites bien que ce que j’ai fait, avant moi personne ne l’avait fait.” (qtd. in Bouchardeau 84).

Indeed, Sarraute can be seen as an innovator in many ways, but if an overarching statement had to be made, her ability to illuminate subjective and inter-subjective relationships through hidden tropismes (undefinable reactions produced in response to a certain stimulus) revealed at the junction of conversation and sous-conversation can be considered the most

---

1 In all quotations, I respect the original punctuation and the typographic choices of the authors, including capitalization and italics. Only the underlining is my own emphasis.

original. On a broader thematic level, her ability to question language as well as the singularity of each person is creatively demonstrated through the theatrical elements added to her own experimental version of what became known as the *Nouveau Roman*. Sarraute managed to break up conformity to specific genres by bringing fiction closer to theatre and theatre closer to life, while constantly reinforcing the central yet ambiguous place the individual holds in her writing.

To carry on the various conversations and sub-conversations raised by Sarraute’s writing further and to point out their contemporary relevance, I would like to extract her work from a literary vacuum, where the value of her writing is based primarily on its formal qualities, and to recontextualize it. With such a goal in mind, this study will be guided by the following hypothesis in the form of a question: How do two works of Nathalie Sarraute, namely *Tu ne t’aimes pas* and *C’est beau*, textualize resistance to consumer society? By examining the concepts of consumers and clichés, I will demonstrate how they are illustrated by the texts and challenged through what I call an aesthetic of undecidability.

As a point of reference for recontextualization of the two works, I have selected Jean Baudrillard’s book *La Société de consommation* (1970) where he describes a society marked by cultural poverty and leveling of meaning, “où il n’y a plus de différence entre une épicerie fine et une galerie de peinture, entre Play-Boy et un Traité de Paléontologie” (22). This seminal work, even though sometimes considered as a modern rather than a postmodern critique\(^3\), was written at the time when American culture started having a major influence in Europe, including France. Despite some outdated examples, it is still very pertinent as a context for both of the works that I propose to examine and will therefore appear as supporting evidence throughout this thesis.\(^4\)

The social landscape produced by Baudrillard is at once reminiscent of fairy tales (with advertising promising to transform even a beast into a beauty) and apocalyptic (as individualism is dead and so is language): “[La majorité] étant vou[ée] à une économie magique, à la valorisation des objets en tant que tels, et de tout le reste en tant qu’objets (idées, loisirs, savoir, culture): *cette logique fétichiste est proprement l’idéologie de la consommation.*” (77). Consumption as a subconscious, subliminal monologue influences every aspect of daily life. Individuals have no choice but to conform narcissistically to the rules of consumption (according

---

\(^{3}\) This problematic has been raised by George Ritzer (1) in the introduction to the English translation of Baudrillard’s book *The Consumer Society*.

\(^{4}\) While *La Société de consommation* is not one of the Baudrillardian books that is mentioned in any of the studies on Nathalie Sarraute that I have come across, his other writing has been addressed in a few. *Le Système des objets* is cited by Charles Bachat (210) in a sociological study of *Le Planétarium* and Baudrillard’s essay “La morale des objets” is used by Roland Le Huenen (250) in his study of the social function of objects in *Vous les entendez*.
to which the body has become “le plus bel objet de sollicitude” (Baudrillard 203) in their attempts to attain the elusive myth of happiness and to be admired or simply accepted by others. Through this reductive behavior and kitschification of language, authenticity in human relationships is lost and so is cultural value. Consumer society is a spectacle based on profusion, hiding social poverty behind the scenes. According to Baudrillard, this “pénurie structurelle […] [est une] stratégie de pouvoir” (89) created and made invisible by consumer society in hopes of preventing its marionnettes from seeing the truth that poverty consists “ni en une faible quantité de biens, ni simplement en un rapport entre des fins et des moyens: elle est avant tout un rapport entre les hommes” (91). The worst, however, is the fact that this interactional poverty strongly contributes to individual depletion: “ Là où chaque relation, dans l’échange primitif, ajoute à la richesse sociale, chaque relation sociale, dans nos sociétés ‘différentielles’, ajoute au manque individuel […].”5 (92). Thus, the individual and language are both perforated by a socially imposed lack.

Before presenting a break-down of my thesis, a certain justification of my work is necessary as throughout her lifetime, Sarraute repeatedly denied having any interest in expressing anything but the materialization of inner impulses and experimenting with form.6 That is to say, Sarraute “plaidera pour une attitude pratique de recherche au lieu d’une prise de position théoricienne” (Boucharbeau 151-152). This tendency is demonstrated in Sarraute’s rejection of socially engaged literature in a conversation with Serge Fauchereau and Jean Ristat:

J’étais contre la littérature engagée parce qu’elle ne se préoccupait pas de cette recherche d’une forme et donc d’un fond neufs. Et aussi parce qu’elle était imposée, démonstrative, éducative. Mais si l’engagement est spontané, s’il se manifeste dans des œuvres vivantes, alors tant mieux ! (17)

While it is not clear what exactly distinguishes spontaneous engagement from demonstrative one, it is obvious that Sarraute privileges subtlety over explicitness. It appears that she is not

5 This phenomenon, while remaining unacknowledged by many, has received well-deserved attention from writers such as Ionesco. In La Cantatrice chauve, for example, Ionesco “dénon[ce] la pauvreté de la vie et de la pensée de nos contemporains dressés à se mouler dans les grands ensembles et les prêts-à-penser qui tendent à niveler toute particularité individuelle” (Goulet 183-184).

6 In the interview with Richard Salesses, Nathalie Sarraute refutes that her work has any relation to her personal life or any social phenomena of the time. Sarraute underlines that in her writing, she seeks to portray “des émotions, des impressions” (qtd. in Brochu and Major 250) and not at all real life. She states: “Je ne parle pas du tout de la vie telle qu’elle se préoccupe pas de cette recherche d’une forme et donc d’un fond neufs. Et aussi parce qu’elle était imposée, démonstrative, éducative. Mais si l’engagement est spontané, s’il se manifeste dans des œuvres vivantes, alors tant mieux ! (257) ; moreover, “ [elle] ne cherche pas du tout une étude sociale” (255) and thus, the plot and the characters of her books are nothing but “un prétexte pour que, derrière cette façade, se développent [les] tropismes” (257). For a more detailed overview of this issue, consult Chapter IV “Individu et Société” in Nathalie Sarraute by Jean Pierrot (209-274). For a particularly antagonistic discussion on the subject, see Marc Saporta’s article “Portrait d’une inconnue (conversation biographique)” (19-23).
against engaged literature, but rather she resists its rigid form. Perhaps, then, Sarraute’s writing could be seen as this spontaneous expression of engagement which she favours.

The above assumption is not singular and reading Sarraute as a case study in cultural anthropology and criticism is not far fetched: it has been noted by numerous critics. The Marxist sociologist Lucien Goldman, for example, remarked the following about the writing of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet:

[...] alors que de nombreux critiques et une grande partie du public voient dans le nouveau roman un ensemble d’expériences purement formelles et, dans le meilleur des cas, une tentative d’évasion hors de la réalité sociale, [...] [cette écriture], au contraire, [...] était née d’un effort aussi rigoureux et aussi radical que possible pour saisir, dans ce qu’elle a de plus essentiel, la réalité de notre temps. (Goldman 283)

He insists that if writers adopt a different form of expression it is because they want to portray a human and social reality that is different from the one illustrated by their predecessors. Goldman further explains that the period of contemporary capitalism following 1945 can be characterized by “la disparition progressive de l’individu en tant que réalité essentielle, et, corrélativement par l’indépendance croissante des objets” (297). In this world, Nathalie Sarraute “cherche partout l’humain authentique, le vécu immédiat [...] [parmi] les extériorisations qui sont toutes, presque sans exception, inauthentiques, distordues et déformées” (299). Jacques Lasalle, quoted by Valérie Minogue in her article “‘Taka’ voir la ‘cata’: Nathalie Sarraute et le langage catastrophique”, has noted that Sarraute’s theatre “malgré l’absence de toute référence à des événements spécifiques, reflète la plupart des grandes préoccupations de notre âge: ‘Rien ou presque, à la surface de ce théâtre, ne nomme explicitement l’Histoire; tout, par en-dessous l’exsude et la désigne.’” (“‘Taka’” 181).

In fact, even though Sarraute claimed that “[l]’histoire n’a pas d’intérêt en soi” (Saporta 20), it is clear that she was not oblivious or indifferent to consumer culture and its effects on the society. This is evident, for instance, in text XII of Tropismes where a professor is compared “au Monsieur peint sur les réclames, qui recommande en souriant, le doigt levé: Saponite – la bonne lessive, ou bien la Salamandre modèle: économie, sécurité, confort” (Tropismes 18). Similar evidence can be found with one of the earlier texts of Tropismes: “[...] le texte qui porte le numéro VI dans l’édition de Denoël et qui fut retiré par Nathalie Sarraute de l’édition de 1957 [...] [en tant que ‘daté’, selon l’écrivaine].” (Bouchardeau 99). This text is about a man who lives according to the rules of his society – “le consommateur” (100). According to Bouchardeau, “[d]ans un style haletant qui sent davantage le polémiste que l’observateur des
‘tropismes’, Nathalie Sarraute semblait dépeindre là une humanité médiocre, prête à tout accepter pourvu qu’on ne touche ni à son confort, ni à sa tranquillité” (100). Bouchardeau further emphasized that this removed text was representative of “la passion froide avec laquelle l’auteur jugeait son époque” (100).

In his article “La suite dans les idées de Nathalie Sarraute”, Pierre Gamarra mentions that “derrière les dialogues en apparence hasardeux, désordonnés, ou vain de Tu ne t’aimes pas, on apercevra vite une pensée lucide et attentive, une écriture rigoureuse et, non point une théorie de paroles égrénées mais une réflexion et une méditation aux formes diverses, de la maxime au portrait, de l’apologue à l’histoire” (216). Similarly, Charles Bachat, in his analysis of Le Planétarium as a “comédie sociale” (206), alludes to contemporary social problems touched upon in Sarraute’s work such as the transition from the use-value to sign-value (in Baudrillardian terms) as well as the domination “d’un langage social appauvri” (213). He concludes his article with a brief overview of Sarraute’s writing:

La place sociologique de l’objet reste considérable dans Le Planétarium, le milieu des gens d’affaires dans leur prospérité récente est mis à mal dans Martereau. […] [La] présence obsédante de l’opinion, des préjugés sociaux parcourt Vous les entendez ?. Et même dans les pièces, derrière le dialogue masqué et anonyme des parleurs, s’insinue un écho du bruitage social. (Bachat 217)

His conclusion is further developed by Celia Britton who believes that “[a]ll of Sarraute’s writing can be seen as […] commenting upon […] linguistic manifestations of what Barthes (in S/Z) calls ‘le code culturel’” (79).7

Even though Sarraute prefers to restrict her artistic preoccupations to formal experimentation, it is important to keep in mind the brilliant statement of Jacques Rancière that helps to negotiate the author’s intent and the interpretation of her work, “l’esthétique a sa politique” (66).

In order to justify the choice of my corpus, a link has to be made between the post-war intellectually charged European atmosphere and the contemporary global situation. The self-adoring consumers described by Baudrillard in the early 1970s have never left the stage to this day. Jean-Yves Guérin in his book Art nouveau ou homme nouveau: modernité et progressisme

---

What surrounds Narcissus is the atmosphere of commodified language and daily platitudes evoked by Baudrillard. The only difference is in the shades, the minor details; the bigger picture is still the same or even more intensely imbued with clichés than before. Another interesting connection is the concept of the storefront: “Cet espace spécifique qu’est la vitrine, ni intérieur ni extérieur, ni privé ni tout à fait public, qui est déjà la rue tout en maintenant derrière la transparence du verre le statut opaque et la distance de la marchandise, cet espace spécifique est aussi le lieu d’une relation sociale spécifique.” (Baudrillard 264-265). Baudrillard was not the only one to comment on the importance of this space. The theatrical quality of window displays is not a new phenomenon, which can be attested by the fact that “human culture is in large measure performative, that is, activity consciously carried out and presented to others in order to have some effect on them” (Carlson 141). More than ever before, this theatricality is pertinent today and it is for this reason that recent work in cultural studies emphasizes this tendency.

According to Anne Britt Gran,

Today one finds a number of perceptions about the present era – postmodernity – as being the era of performance, game, irony, play, of kitsch, of the pastiche, of simulacrum, seduction, masquerade, the staging of the body and the subject-in short, the era of what we often associate with the “theater-like” or “the theatrical” in all its derivations. (Gran 252)

Paul B. Makeham’s article “Performing the City” is informed by a similar point of view, for he writes that “[p]erformance and performativity are intrinsic to urban life and design. A mobile billboard; an illuminated building at night; a park fountain; an episode of road rage; a store window display; a queue – all of these comprise performative elements” (152).

---

8 Makeham adds: “Creative cities now are careful to create positive, high quality images of themselves, and have sought architectural forms that reflect this sense of self. This often involves the concerted organization of spectacle
Galleries and theatres have long been the main disseminators of culture, but with the new pacing of life and quickly changing values, a smaller proportion of the public acquires its culture through these venues. Store displays have become the focal space for contemporary staging of culture. Realizing that going to galleries requires a certain expertise and audacity on the part of the visitors while going to theatres is often a pricey endeavour, the consumer industry has found a perfect alternative. The public no longer needs to step inside any space, to cross the institutionalized lines of culturedness, their time and intellectual competencies are not compromised as the window display becomes an immediate stage for the enactment of culture. It is the space that at once exhibits and stages a performance that is temporary, passing like fashion. Mannequins become silent actors and passersby become the audience, ‘cultivating’ themselves on the go, instantaneously, subliminally. The storefronts become the fast-food of culture. This interpenetration of theatricality and reality is an essential aspect of consumer society and it is an important factor in my choice of works to analyze.

Interested in examining Sarraute’s writing that has the most social relevance, I have chosen a novel and a play that integrate this theatricality in a critical manner, effacing the restrictions of their respective genres. Each of these works goes beyond the mere staging of the social, but rather offers a productive dialogue, and even though they are of different genres and not from the same period, they are complementary. The novel and the play both raise important issues concerning the nature of the Subject and language in consumer society that can be studied through a postmodern optic and that continue to preoccupy us to this day both socially and individually.

I will start with the study of *Tu ne t’aimes pas*, as it seems logical to begin with the examination of the Subject and then to move on to the exploration of the language and the subsequent construction of cultural meaning that is manipulated by the Subjects in *C’est beau*.9

*Tu ne t’aimes pas* (1989) is a novel, of 143 pages in the Pléiade edition, entirely constructed as a dialogue or rather as a set of inner-plurilogues or plurivocal dialogues that are

---

and theatricality, a kind of urban planning which endorses not realism, but facade; which models itself not on utilitarian ideas of traffic flow and pedestrian efficiency, but the stage set, the carnival, and the forum – spaces which engage the real and transform it.” (157).

9 Since a single volume of *Œuvres complètes* will be used for quoting Sarraute’s writing in this thesis, to distinguish between the different works, the in-text citations will be followed by the first word of the work’s title instead of the last name of the author to facilitate the reading (ex. *Tu 15* – for *Tu ne t’aimes pas*). If something is quoted form the *Notices, notes et variantes*, however, the designation *Œuvres* will precede the page number. In the rare cases where the Folio edition will be cited, the publication date will appear following the title designation to indicate a different edition (ex. *Tu*, 1989, 15).
concerned with negotiating the lack of self-love inside a polyvalent body and vicariously become a perfect territory for an exploration of the self-loving antagonists. In this novel, which is more like a play\textsuperscript{10}, the \textit{sous-conversation} takes over the real dialogues and brings out the tropismal implications of a seemingly trivial statement: “Tu ne t’aimes pas”. According to Monique Wittig, dialogues in \textit{Tu ne t’aimes pas} “ont le sens d’‘entretiens’ entre plusieurs personnes sur un thème philosophique. D’entrée […], le débat porte sur le ‘je’ et l'amour de soi. Nous sommes, nous le lecteur, dans un entretien philosophique tenu dans le […] ‘je’. […] Ce théâtre ici on peut l'appeler le théâtre du ‘for intérieur’, c'est-à-dire un théâtre mental où tout est permis” (112-114).\textsuperscript{11}

In the novel, as part of her progression over the years towards more abstract and more internally-centred characters, Sarraute excludes any labeling or precise description of the characters; she only goes as far as to separate the two opposing sides into those who love themselves and those who do not. Since my reading of her work is informed by Baudrillard’s consumption theory, I take the liberty to use her purposefully vague designation of characters along with my own interpretation of their roles in the social context. In order to make my argument more clear it is difficult to forego a certain level of labeling for the sake of

\textsuperscript{10} While bringing out internal communication that would not be accessible on stage, dialogues in \textit{Tu ne t’aimes pas} are more similar to “[…] le dialogue de théâtre, qui se passe de tuteurs, où l’auteur ne fait pas à tout moment sentir qu’il est là, prêt à donner un coup de main, ce dialogue qui doit se suffire à lui-même et sur lequel tout repose, est plus ramassé, plus dense, plus tendu et survolé que le dialogue romanesque: il mobilise davantage toutes les forces du spectateur” (L’Ère 1601).

\textsuperscript{11} This idea of the novel that reads much more like a play about the human unconscious without limits is rather accurate and typographically, the Folio edition is more successful in fostering such an interpretation. While the Pléiade edition will be used to cite all of Sarraute’s texts, it is important to comment on some visual discrepancies between the two editions. In \textit{Tu ne t’aimes pas}, one encounters three types of textual breaks (the first two are the same in both editions, while the third one is different). Firstly, there are the most common 1 cm breaks which mark different perspectives of the ‘nous’; not every change in voice is thus signaled but only some of them, indicating the discordance of certain voices and intensifying tension between the different ‘nous’ (e.g.: \textit{Tu} 1151; \textit{Tu}, 1989, 12). The second break is a 2 cm break which only appears once throughout the whole novel and it seems to mark a turning point in the book where the attention of the interlocutors is diverted from those who love themselves and from their own inner states to another thing – a poem (\textit{Tu} 1198; \textit{Tu}, 1989, 79) – which triggers a profound realization. Finally, the third type of break in the Pléiade is a 2 cm break accompanied by an asterisk. There are 24 such breaks in the novel, or one could say 25, since the first section which opens the novel appears without the symbolic asterisk, but otherwise implies it. These divisions are not unlike section breaks or chapters, much like those in Sarraute’s novels published in the same edition (e.g.: \textit{Enfance, Entre la vie et la mort, Portrait d’un inconnu}, etc.). These sections could be explained as symmetrical transitions between encounters with self-loving models and philosophical musings on the nature of the self and self-love. So while the Pléiade treats \textit{Tu ne t’aimes pas} as a novel with particular structure where the asterisks neatly delimitate one thought from another, the Folio edition simply starts each section on a new page, thus visually enlarging the previous breaks but without completely breaking the simplicity of such transitions. In the Folio edition, the text flows better and contributes to the reading of the novel as an inner play with infinite possibilities rather than a more rigid and traditional novel.
differentiation. But, to avoid simplification and adherence to clichés abhorred by Sarraute, I have created a set of neologisms (free from pre-set, overused meaning) that correspond to my reading of the text: Consumables and Inconsumables. The former are the self-loving, narcissistic consumers who have a clear image of themselves and who become models for others to emulate, to consume. The Inconsumables, while often attracted by the consumer lifestyle, cannot be consumed in their turn as the image which they project outwards is incoherent, multiple and thus prevents a holistic infatuation with the self produced by consumptive relationships. Even though the differences seem to be clear, the problem of distinguishing the Consumables from the Inconsumables has to be discussed. The novel is narrated from the perspective of those who do not love themselves (Inconsumables); these emanations are usually referred to as “nous” or more rarely as “toi” who are opposed to “eux”, “il”, “elle” or “ceux qui s’aiment”. The Consumables (unlike the Inconsumables, for the most part) can be viewed from outside and certain settings are associated with their appearances such as a street, a garden, a train or a terrace, while the Inconsumables muddle about in an unidentifiable, abstract, mental space. But as the text is fluid and some exceptions to the rules do exist, there is a possibility of considering the Consumables as yet other emanations of the Inconsumables and thus part of the same person; such a reading, while creating even more ambiguity on the account of individual construction, does not however undermine my argument, as the juxtaposition of the two can then be interpreted not as an opposition between two types of people (the reading I privilege in this study) but rather between the two tendencies of a contemporary human being.

The chapter on *Tu ne t’aimes pas* will be divided into two parts. The first part will address the image of the Consumables by exploring how their personalities are constructed, namely through the strategies of narcissism and personalization. The second part will examine the Inconsumables to demonstrate how they resist commodification. While everything seems certain and well-defined for the Consumables, the Inconsumables are deconstructed entities plagued by uncertainty and indetermination – attributes of authentic individuals. Their qualities

---

12 Sarraute “has always sought to undermine conventional terms and labels, to burrow beneath these appeasing classifications and to extract the mobile essences they temporarily shield” (Besser 153).


14 It is also worthwhile mentioning a certain typographical choice on my part. When quotes from the text are less than four lines in length, I decided to avoid using block quotations and to indicate a change in voice in a dialogue citation by slashes /, as is done in poetry, to designate the beginning of a new line in the book.
will be revealed through a study of the multiplicity of voices and the establishment of the voice of reason.

*C'est beau* (1975), a play of only 18 pages in the Pléiade edition, that stages three family members and a chorus of offstage voices, probes the question of sincerity of language but more importantly, centres on the clichés that construct all social exchanges and affect cultural values. This play, in many ways, is a development or a zooming-in on a problematic already addressed in Sarraute’s earlier novel *Vous les entendez?* (1972) where a conflict, concerning a piece of sculpture, between a father and his children escalates, culminating in incommunicability. But unlike this novel, *C’est beau* puts a poignant spin on the aesthetic conflict by attributing its significance to language. Influenced by the theatre of Pirandello, Sarraute deals with similar issues such as the themes of role playing in life, the ambiguity of truth, the problem of distinguishing ‘reality’ from ‘make-believe’, art from life.

The chapter on *C’est beau* will also be divided into two parts. It will first address clichés, namely the nature of banal discourse, represented by the expression “C’est beau”, and the depleted meaning of language that has become objectified and constantly falls prey to being exchanged like a mere product by unconsciously conforming family members. Then, the strategies of abstraction and extension will be explored as tools of resistance to the commodification of language followed by accumulation and decentrement achieved through “thick description”. The latter will be dealt with in detail in order to demonstrate how paradigmatic expression\(^{15}\) of the son contributes to the aesthetic of undecidability and consequently to the reconstruction of language.

In the end, no matter what Sarraute claimed, her writing is dialogical, which means that she is in a conversation with the real world; Bakhtine’s brilliant statement summarizes this perfectly: “La vie est dialogique de par sa nature. Vivre signifie participer à un dialogue […]” (qtd. in Todorov 149). In my turn, through this study of the individual and language in the two works of Sarraute, I hope to extend this dialogue on the subject of identitary and linguistic transformations that follow in the steps of “une tendance post-moderne au consensus mou et à la confusion” (Guérin 426).

\(^{15}\) In order to demonstrate the construction of paradigmatic expression, lowercase numbers such as (1), (2), (3) will be used to designate each approximation and rearticulation in a given quotation. For example: “Ça lui donne chaud (1), n’est-ce pas? Elle a envie de se boucher les oreilles (2)… de se cacher (3)…” (*C’est* 1454).
Chapter: Reanimation of the Individual (Tu ne t’aimes pas)

What does it mean to reanimate an individual? It could mean to give new life or to recreate a person, in other words, to improve something in a previously miserable, unfortunate or unclear state. In Tu ne t’aimes pas, where the self-less protagonist tries to understand why ‘he’ does not love ‘himself’ through a series of encounters with self-loving individuals and through internal musings, it means to retrieve an authentic individual from the background of multiplicity of indeterminate narcissistic voices. This process of reanimation is at the heart of the dialogical novel, but it is also at the slightly less obvious center of the image on its cover and since this particular image does not speak for itself, I will have to speak on its behalf in order to reanimate it.

Paul Klee’s 1922 watercolour entitled Unstable equilibrium is Sarraute’s choice for the book’s cover16. This painting illustrates “the interaction of balance and tension” (Klee et al. 254), the play of forces that produces a precarious balance (355). Done in subdued tones of blues and browns with blocks of white, it is an abstract collage-like painting, a construction made of geometric shapes including pseudo-triangles, rectangles, and distorted squares, marked with arrows and selective texturing to create patterns that further divide the shapes within a rectangular frame. In this abundance of motifs many images can be perceived at once, as in Klee’s later compositions of ‘magic squares’ (Les Années 20 18). One could see consumer society bursting with desire and invading the background of a rectangle with a multitude of black arrows pointing outwards toward the margins. The centre, bustling with activity and populated with a variety of different yet repetitive designs, is the social space of performative culture. Since “la culture n’est plus produite pour durer” (Baudrillard 151-152), it is portrayed as unstable, in constant flux, ideally illustrating the fact that there is no more Culture with a capital ‘c’; there is only temporary cultural fashion (“l’actualité de la mode culturelle”) (153). This tumultuous centre is an image of a society where “la consommation est d’abord orchestrée comme un discours à soi-même” (122), subliminally integrated into the individual’s subconscious where it camouflages itself and transforms into one of the many inner voices. Thus, one could also see, amidst the same shapes, an incoherent image of an individual who can neither be fully grasped

nor defined\textsuperscript{17}, trying to grapple with desires and to resist the unified and complete image imposed by the social norms.

For Klee, abstract forms and geometric shapes are not arbitrary; they are called forth by \textit{instinctual stimuli} and, therefore, they fulfill the role of the \textit{germinal motifs} (\textit{Paintings and Watercolors} 12) that cause lines to become “carriers of motion and emotion” (8). In fact, Klee’s rhetoric is very similar to that used by Sarraute to designate \textit{tropisms} which provoke a whole slew of actions and reactions that are fluid and infinite in nature and go on at the level of \textit{sous-conversation}. Similarly, Klee’s theory of painting, influenced by music, focuses on “the polyphony of visual composition, which is based on the simultaneity of forms in space” (13) – a theme that is very dear to Sarraute and through which she reanimates her amorphous character in \textit{Tu ne t’aimes pas}.

Besides lending a visual representation to Sarraute’s novel, Klee’s work reminds us, according to Wilhelm Hausenstein, that “from the formal play, content develops” (qtd. in \textit{Paintings and Watercolors} 8). For instance, during his post at the Bauhaus, Klee was eager to unite “architecture, sculpture and painting in the ‘new edifice of the future’” (9), hoping, as did his fellow colleagues, to overcome the decorative conception of art and to reach a principle of meaningful construction that could transform life. Similarly, in the case of Sarraute’s writing, in spite of her refusal to be associated with anything beyond formal innovation, ‘from aesthetics, arise politics’, in a Rancièrean sense.

In order to demonstrate how Nathalie Sarraute manages to reanimate the individual in a consumer society in \textit{Tu ne t’aimes pas}, I will begin with a close examination of the Consumables. First, narcissism will be addressed as the pivotal mode of self-construction comprising two stages: conceiving of oneself as a hero of a magical world and as a compact object of perfection. Second, personalization will be explored as a way of complete integration into the consumer society, beginning with a transformation into an acting subject and culminating with an image of a superior human being. Then, the Inconsumables will be studied in detail. Their multiplicity of voices will be analyzed with an emphasis on two main traits: the emergence of an undefinable identity as well as the proliferation of contradictory selves. Finally, the voice of reason will be considered as the key to remaining incomprehensible. Particular attention will be paid to the resistance to superficial love and to the reconsideration of the self and the external world.

\textsuperscript{17} Even though Klee’s works are ambiguous in nature, resisting interpretation, this reading is possible since he claimed that “every form has its face, its physiognomy, shapes look at us” (qtd. in \textit{Paintings and Watercolors} 12).
1.1 The Consumables

The force of consumption as a subconscious monologue is quite remarkable. It produces, in the greatest numbers, the dominant social class – monsters disguised as princesses, or simply put – the Consumables. Using publicity as its indispensible servant, consumerism fosters narcissism and fetishization of the body as well as the need for its personalization as its main strategies of social conformism while others (the Inconsumables) are needed as a peripheral mirror, minor competitors, and quiet admirers – the marginal audience.

To better elucidate this strategy of the consumer society, let us turn to the analysis of desire proposed by René Girard in his book *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, where he explains that fictional characters (as well as real human beings) imitate the desires of the models whom they select for themselves (14); according to Girard, desires are not spontaneous for they are borrowed from others; in other words, one always imitates the desires of others (15). This idea is referred to as *le désir triangulaire* (11), which is shared between *le sujet désirant*, *le médiateur du désir* (who is at the same time *le rival* (16) and fulfills “le rôle primordial de modèle religieusement imité” (19)) and *l’objet du désir*. In this schema, the Consumables play different roles depending on the context. At first, they are desiring subjects, seduced by the tropes of publicity; later, they take on their main role as mediators of desire for the Inconsumables and, vicariously, they themselves (or more accurately, *their way of being*) become the real objects of desire because “l’objet [du désir] n’est qu’un moyen d’atteindre le médiateur. C’est l’être de ce médiateur que vise le désir.” (59). In this sense, self-loving people consume others and are consumed by others, hence their name – the Consumables.

thinking back on the construction and the abstraction that underpin Klee’s painting, let’s examine what the Consumables are made of and how they are structured in order to determine their real position in this precariously balanced society where even rectangles take on triangular dimensions as part of general *trompe-l’oeil*.

1.1.1 Narcissism

Narcissism, generally defined as a mere infatuation with the self, takes on a slightly different significance in consumer society: “Le narcissisme de l’individu en société de consommation n’est pas jouissance de la singularité, il est réfraction de traits collectifs.” (Baudrillard 137).

---

While the self-adoration of the Consumables implies a certain deviation which makes them supposedly unique, it is nourished by their indulgence in the objects of desire that are mass produced and thus disseminated to the public at large, effacing the uniqueness. In fact, the very basis of their narcissistic love stems from the collective consciousness and cultural stereotypes that are solidified in an attempt to package an individual into a compact object of perfection.

The first step in this construction is that of becoming the hero of a magical world. This magical world is a product of fairy tale rhetoric that has been appropriated by advertising: “[…] c’est une pensée magique qui régît la consommation, c’est une mentalité miraculeuse qui régît la vie quotidienne […]” (27). By employing this basic type of collective consciousness, advertising usurps its victorious status that is conveniently located, according to Baudrillard, “au-delà du vrai et du faux”: “[…] comme tous les mythes et paroles magiques, la publicité se fonde sur un autre type de vérification – celui de la selffulfilling prophecy […].” (197).

Like Sleeping Beauty at her christening, those who love themselves (the Consumables) are endowed with many gifts, among which self-love is the most precious: “C’est vraiment le plus envié des dons… que les bonnes fées leur ont offert à leur naissance…” (Tu 1153). This gift of self-love promised by the fairies is in fact like “une parole prophétique [de la publicité] dans la mesure où elle ne donne pas à comprendre ni à apprendre, mais à espérer” (Baudrillard 197-198). Thus, narcissism becomes synonymous with advertising that is “[un] miracle virtuel de la gratuité” (262), “[qui] se fait partout discrète, bénévole, effacée, désintéressée” (163).

This miraculous atmosphere surrounds every appearance of self-loving persons. For instance, when one of the Consumables is observed by the self-less protagonist, his complete and fully-tangible appearance ceases to matter; all that is presented to the reader is an isolated part of the body that miraculously, like a floating signifier, testifies (according to Baudrillard) to this individual’s narcissistic infatuation with the self: “[…] ce n’est qu’une main. L’homme à qui elle appartient, on ne le voit pas, il reste dans l’ombre… Sa main seule est là en pleine lumière devant nous… une longue main un peu noueuse aux ongles coupés ras… […]/ – Il regarde intensément sa main posée sur la table./ – Et dans son regard tant d’amour…” (Tu 1157). All ulterior motives of this exposition, such as the desire to make the viewer “fall in love” with what he sees, are effaced and what is left is the seemingly disinterested spectacle of self-admiration. The self-less delegates observe this scene in utter admiration, comparing their own hands which are “des objets utilitaires, des ustensiles limités à leur fonction” (1158) to a single exquisite artifact laid

---

19 A similar tendency is noted by René Girard who points out that “[l]e désir projette autour du héro un univers de rêve” (26).
before their eyes: “Un vrai miracle, cette main… un de ces prodiges de la création…” (1157). Interestingly enough, both advertising and fashion use “les parties morcelées du corps dans un gigantesque processus de sublimation, de conjuration du corps dans son évocation même” (Baudrillard 209). In order for these industries to produce profit, a particular transformation, which is already at work in the self-loving representative, needs to take place: “Il faut que l’individu se prenne lui-même comme objet, comme le plus beau des objets, comme le plus précieux matériel d’échange, pour que puisse s’instituer au niveau du corps déconstruit, de la sexualité déconstruite un processus économique de rentabilité.” (211)

It does not take long for this Consumable ‘object of perfection’ to be seen as an enchanted fairy tale character: “[…] au centre de la salle, éclatante de beauté, la reine du bal… sur elle tous les regards des assistants se concentrent…” (Tu 1159). The man caressing his hand with the most loving gaze and who finds satisfaction in every part of his daily routine is perceived by the self-less, in part with admiration and in part with irony, as a stunning Cinderella. Moreover, the objectification to which the Consumables succumb does not limit itself to the individual, since it emanates outwards and takes on new forms: “Celui qui s’aime avec assez d’intensité transforme tout ce qui émane de lui en richesses… tout sans exception… ses moindres manifestations, esquisses, brouillons, bavardages, radotages, balbutiements, cartes de vœux, nom écrit de sa main, livres de comptes, effet des cigarettes sur le fonctionnement de son intestin… ” (1160).20 Basically, everything is for sale, like some celebrity’s paraphernalia; every personal vestige acquires the weight of gold. This limitless love either transforms everything into treasures or takes on the form of a “chef-d’œuvre” (1160), a physical masterpiece to be admired by those who do not love themselves.

Not only are the Consumables endowed with the gift of self-love, they also posses magic powers of their own. One representative of the self-admiring individuals gesticulates as if he were manipulating a magic wand: “– Il lève la main, il la rabaisse et dit: ‘Je n’ai jamais compris l’engouement de certains…’ / – Ce qui souffle de ces paroles balai efface d’un seul coup… tout a disparu… et dans l’espace vacant devant nous sous ses ordres une ville s’érige… Sa ville à lui. Et c’est aussi maintenant notre ville à nous.” (Tu 1264). Where else beyond the realm of fairy tales do entire cities arise with a single stroke of the hand? Where else but in advertising can one

20 While Sarraute, as author, is being critical and ironic in her description of the Consumables, the self-less narrator, to whom these words are attributed, could be divided between irony, admiration, and mere constatation of facts, as there are many voices coming through him. On the other hand, provided that the self-less narrator is representative of Sarraute’s perceptions on identity, her own voice could also be ambiguous, fluctuating between irony and honest disbelief at the real power of the Consumables.
see wrinkles effaced overnight and replaced with supple new skin or else, certain cultural norms replaced with newly imposed, generic practices of consumerism? What is certain, however, is that this powerful wizard cannot be qualified as someone ordinary; he is an unattainable, a superman: “[…] rusé, faux, sincère, franc, ce sont des notions qui ne conviennent pas quand il s’agit de lui, il faut les oublier… […] il ne peut pas être qualifié, […] il ne peut pas être jugé comme n’importe qui… Il est hors de toute commune mesure, il est au-dessus, au-delà… C’est un être exceptionnel… […] c’est l’homme ‘surnaturel’…” (1261). In the presence of this fabulous giant, words become harmless little objects that do not reach him, “des minuscules chiffons, des petits bouts de papier” (1272); this ‘hero’ is constantly protected against any subversive language, rendering the self-less companions helpless when “d’un coup de pied dédaigneux il fait vaciller, s’écrouler ce qui […] avait toujours paru indestructible… […] – Nous voyons s’effondrer… il va falloir les enterrer… des époques, des civilisations” (1268). This super-hero-giant is not unlike large corporations fueled by globalization and capitalism that take over earlier systems, without any possible resistance. In fact, he could easily serve as a metaphor for the big brands that have come to dominate the contemporary social landscape, evening it out on a global scale, namely Starbucks, McDonald’s, and Disneyland among others.

As part of these magical transformations, it becomes easy to see how those who love themselves become an allegory for advertising itself. This interpretation can be supported by a review of how it functions: “La fonction sociale de la publicité est à saisir dans la même perspective extra-économique de l’idéologie du don, de la gratuité et du service.” (Baudrillard 261). The combination of these principles is clearly illustrated in one of the interactions between the self-loving individual and the self-less:

- C’est sur des sourires que nous le [the one who loves himself] quittons…
- Un air d’amusement, de satisfaction, de complicité flotte encore sur les visages [of those who do not love themselves] quand dehors nous nous séparons…
- Emportant ce qu’il a eu la générosité de nous remettre, ce don qu’il a fait à chacun de nous…
- Ce secret qu’il nous a fait l’honneur de nous confier… (Tu 1271)

---

21 In a sub-section entitled “Le pathos du sourire”, Baudrillard explains that our society is marked by “[la] consommation de relation humaine”, “[la] consommation des signes […] de […] sollicitude […] et […] la réinjection systématique de relation humaine – sous forme de signes” (255). Hence, what is essential is “la lubrification des rapports sociaux par le sourire institutionnel” (256).
There is something uneasy however in the way these principles function. The ambiguity of these free services and gifts can be seen in the scene where the self-loving ‘giant’ takes a hold of one of the self-less ‘dwarfs’ and in a humiliating fashion makes him an object of his demonstration: “[…] inclinant au-dessus d’eux sa taille immense, se baissant, saisissant à ses pieds, tenant en l’air entre deux doigts un petit bonhomme de la taille de chacun d’eux, […] il le roule de côté et d’autre, l’observe…” (1273). Like Gulliver, the self-adoring giant is amused by the strangeness of the other. Shockingly enough, the exhibited dwarf expresses neither anger nor outrage, rather there is a sense of appreciation: “de contentement, de fierté…/ – De gratitude envers celui, si grand, qui l’a retrouvé, lui si infime, lui qui se croyait oublié, mis au rebut… […]/ – C’est sous ce regard que pendant ne serait-ce que quelques instants il lui a été donné de vivre…” (1274). The naïve self-less human being believes that the ‘generous’ attention of the ‘big-hearted’ giant that illuminates him like a spotlight gives him meaning and significance (which are certainly the ‘most precious gifts’ he can ever hope for if he searches for approval of others). But, after much reflection, the self-less protagonist realizes that the world of the giants (in a sense of ‘superior’ human beings) is too extravagant, “[u]n monde qui ressemble si peu au nôtre” (1236).

Further construction of the Consumables is based on the multiple layers of stereotypical conventions that are accumulated and reinforced to provide a strong fundament. These conventions can be described as particular modes of seeing and being.

The self-loving person first establishes a concrete rapport with a specific mode of seeing. This mode is examined through an encounter with one of the Consumables: “Quand il n’était encore qu’un petit enfant, il avait réussi ce tour de force de faire un autoportrait./ – Ou plutôt une statue de lui-même qu’il a toujours portée en lui… […]/ – […] Cette statue de lui-même l’occupe tout entier, il n’y a de place en lui que pour elle.” (Tu 1165-1166). This statue, however, is not a mere materialization of narcissistic love; it follows a certain pattern, a mode of seeing that requires an imitation of the other, a model: “[…] il l’avait copiée sur ce qu’il avait trouvé dans des livres d’enfant… On y montrait des enfants qui deviendraient plus tard de grands

---

22 In her article, “Nathalie Sarraute et l’usage des contes”, Madeleine Borgomano does an exceptional analysis of intertextual references to fairy tales in numerous works of Sarraute. She emphasizes that in Sarraute’s writing, “parler de contes […] n’est permis que sous forme ironique” (65). Borgomano points out that while in some novels it is neither the characters nor the situations that are borrowed from children’s stories but rather the magical atmosphere itself (63) with the motifs of enchantment and metamorphosis (69), in others works tales serve as a reminder of “une pensée ‘prêt à porter’” (64) or cliché expressions. She also underlines that fairy tale references are rarely euphoric: “[elles sont] plus souvent fortement chargées d’ambivalence” (64).

23 Although in this case it is not the giant that is the prisoner but a dwarf.
Il a voulu en être un, lui aussi. Il a donc fabriqué une statue de futur génie qui était lui. Et il était elle. Ils ne faisaient qu’un, sa statue et lui. Alors ensemble ils ont grandi…” (1166). This fairy-tale-like description of becoming molded in the footsteps of a classical model as a child is very similar to the construction of the self as an adult according to the templates of social fashion. The emphasis on the extended metaphor of construction need not be weakened, as Baudrillard rightly specifies that “[i]l est tout différent de valoir par des qualités naturelles, et de se faire-valoir par adhésion à un modèle et selon un code constitué” (139). In his sub-chapter “La production industrielle des différences”, he describes the changes that have taken place in the post-industrial societies:

Les différences réelles qui marquaient les personnes faisaient d’elles des êtres contradictoires. Les différences “personnalisantes” n’opposent plus les individus les uns aux autres, elles se hiérarchisent toutes sur une échelle indéfinie, et convergent dans des modèles à partir desquels elles sont subtilement produites et reproduites. Si bien que se différencier, c’est précisément s’affilier à un modèle, se qualifier par référence à un modèle abstrait, à une figure combinatoire de mode, et donc par là se dessaisir de toute différence réelle, de toute singularité […]. (Baudrillard 126)

So while they are constructing themselves as admirable geniuses of the future, the Consumables are in fact failing to see that “c’est sur la perte des différences que se fonde le culte de la différence” (127). In other words, every attempt at visibly distinguishing oneself undoubtedly becomes co-opted into a pre-packages structure of differences, as in the consumer society every personality is branded and for sale.

While trying to understand how a self-loving person is able to project such a clear image of himself, the self-less protagonist asks one such man whether when he looks deep into himself, into his conscience, he clearly sees who he is. The man is at ease in his reply: “un homme de cinquante ans, père de famille d’origine irlandaise…” (Tu 1155). This answer is not satisfactory for the self-less inquisitor, so after the question is rephrased, the man clarifies: “c’est assez complexe… il y a deux hommes en moi, je suis tantôt l’un tantôt l’autre, pas les deux à la fois…” (1155). He further refutes a comparison to Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, as these characters seem too drastic to refer to the inner being whom he loves even if it is not entirely homogenous.

What this experimental questioning exposes once again is the self-loving person’s adherence to certain ways of seeing oneself that are very complete, clear and neat. The conclusion drawn by the self-less protagonist is that in the world of Consumables there are only three ways of
formulating the self: either by adhering to the masculine or feminine models\textsuperscript{24} or by appropriating an androgynous identity\textsuperscript{25}.

Even the negative aspects (Tu 1153) of the self-loving character serve to perfect his construction instead of condemning it to complete chaos and disrepair. This paradox exists because the self-loving person constructs himself by means of reflections which are either mirrored, social (imposed by images in the media) or interactional (projected by others). Michela Marzano notes in her study of Tu ne t’aimes pas that a type of reflection common to the self-admiring person is “une image nette qui exclut toute contradiction et qui contribue à la construction d’une ‘statue’, sorte d’autoportrait muet […] [qui] […] n’est qu’une surface qui cherche à se contempler dans un miroir mensonger” (227). Despite its semblance of reality, this reflection is nourished by advertising tropes\textsuperscript{26} to produce a fake but satisfying conception of the self: “C’est un effet de surface qui donne à voir uniquement ce qu’ils veulent; c’est une représentation affaiblie de leur être, une imitation, un écho; c’est une copie mimée de la réalité qui met en scène leur vide et leur vacuité.” (228).

Once the mode of seeing has been established, the Consumables transition to solidifying their model of being. This mode is nothing other than happiness. In his description of the social logic behind consumption, Baudrillard addresses the concept of happiness:

_Tout le discours sur les besoins repose sur une anthropologie naïve: celle de la propension naturelle au bonheur. Le bonheur, inscrit en lettres de feu derrière la moindre publicité pour les Canaries ou les sels de bain, c’est la référence absolue de la société de consommation: c’est proprement l’équivalent du salut. Mais quel est ce bonheur qui hante la civilisation moderne avec une telle force idéologique? (Baudrillard 59)\_\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24}“Une fois qu’ils ont pris ce pli de se sentir tels qu’on les voit, ils le gardent toujours… à chaque étape de leur vie, ils se sentent être des femmes, des hommes… / – Et rien que cela. De ‘vraies’ femmes, de ‘vrais’ hommes… le plus conformes possible aux modèles…” (Tu 1164).

\textsuperscript{25}“Il y en a bien qui se sentent comme un mélange d’homme et de femme… mais toujours le plus simple des mélanges…” (Tu 1164).

\textsuperscript{26}To justify the interpretation of this reflection as that produced by the advertising sphere, it is sufficient to provide another example that deals with similar rhetoric. In his book that problematizes the reading of the gravures found in _L’Encyclopédie_, Jacques Proust compares the twisted representation of reality in these engravings to similar strategies offered by contemporary advertising images. He explains that advertising always creates the neatest image of its product, “à la fois la plus exacte et la plus alléchante” (4), presented “dans le cadre aussi harmonieux que possible […] où tout ce qui pourrait éveiller l’idée d’un conflit ou d’une simple contradiction en est généralement gommé” (4). Rather than simply promoting a particular product, this is done in order to sell a particular lifestyle (“mode de vie”) that will culminate in the final transaction, namely, of selling “le désir du désir” (4).
In this mode of being lies the source of the novel itself, as *Tu ne t’aimes pas* presents a quest the aim of which is to discover what it is to love oneself and to be happy. The self-less narrator thus seeks visible evidence of the above mentioned phenomenon in the Consumables:

‘Vingt ans de bonheur… Eh oui… j’ai eu ça…’ une pierre précieuse qu’ils [those who love themselves] sortent de leur coffret à bijoux et nous font admirer… ‘Vingt ans de bonheur’…

- Un joyau dont ils se parent devant nous…
- Ainsi embelli, ils se contemplent… ils se trouvent encore plus dignes de s’aimer…

(*Tu* 1174-1175)

This happiness takes on the shape of “un bloc compact, énorme” (1176), transforming from a precious but miniature jewel-like object into an imposing monument worth valorizing.\(^{27}\) It is therefore not surprising that after being completely objectified, happiness also becomes a brand: “Le Bonheur était là tout préparé, connu depuis toujours, bien visible de très loin, s’étalant partout, s’offrant, arborant son nom, le nom le plus réputé qui soit, le plus prestigieux.” (1176). This metamorphosis is evident when happiness is ironically compared to “un vin qu’on boit en sachant qu’il est versé d’une bouteille qui porte une grande marque” (1185) and when it is subdivided into categories where exclusive types of happiness are portrayed as a limited resource, a rare find, something that only elite customers can afford: “[...] les plus réputés, les mieux cotés, ceux que proposent les plus beaux dépliants, ceux qui portent les meilleures marques sont en nombre limité. Certains matériaux de grand luxe entrent dans leur composition… l’Amour, bien sûr, un modèle, une perfection d’Amour, et puis le Succès, et puis…” (1177).

This mode of being happy is not only something that is visible but also experiential: “Le Bonheur est le milieu ambiant qui lui convient. [...] Le Bonheur est ‘l’air qu’il respire’ [...]” (*Tu* 1177). Happiness, therefore, evokes a certain place, a location; it becomes a terrestrial paradise but only for those who have “[u]ne âme pure, harmonieuse, généreuse” (1175) – the Consumables: “– Rien que ce mot ‘Bonheur’ fait apparaître en nous, quand on essaie de le voir avec plus de netteté, de ces images… / – Celles des dépliants offerts aux vacanciers… Une mer toute lisse, toute bleue, un ciel sans nuage…” (1175). Paradise, even though a tourist trap, is of course also a magical place akin to that of fairy tales: “– Dans ce lieu imposant, somptueux, avec

\(^{27}\) It is exactly this ostentatiously visible quality of happiness that Baudrillard ridicules in his work: “Le bonheur comme jouissance totale ou intérieure, ce bonheur indépendant de signes qui pourraient le manifester aux yeux des autres et aux nôtres, ce bonheur qui n’a pas besoin de preuves est donc exclu d’emblée de l’idéal de consommation, où le bonheur [...] doit [...] se signifier toujours au ‘regard’ de critères visibles.” (60).
ce nom qu’il porte… Le Bonheur. Un nom si réputé… […]/ – Des petites gens sortis de leur petite vie et invités dans un palais princier, à une fête élégante… […]…[...] où tout doit rester si beau, d’une impeccable beauté…” (1178-1179). The charm of this place, however, can be easily broken when one considers the fact that “[l’]opulence, l’‘affluence’ n’est en effet que l’accumulation des signes du bonheur” (Baudrillard 27); the key word here is signes, meaning that while one can accumulate signs of happiness, there may not be any real substance behind them. This absence of real happiness is bound to make any princely palace crumble in the end.

Despite the shaky ground, or perhaps because of it, the second step to becoming a Consumable is to establish the self as a compact object of perfection through self-centeredness and authoritative solidity.

Self-centeredness begins in part as self-assuredness and certainty. For the self-loving individuals, this certainty manifests itself in the way they constantly affirm the unity of their identity: “Ce qu’il m’a dit m’a blessé. Oui, j’ai été froissé. Pourquoi au juste ? Oh je n’en sais trop rien. Ce qui est certain, c’est que ça m’a été désagréable.” (Tu 1203). The emphasis on the pronouns je and me leaves no doubt about the completeness of the self-loving speaker. A similar case can be observed in the scene where a self-adoring woman cuts her hand with shears while pruning or cutting something (likely flowers) outside. With indignation, she refuses the attempt of the self-less protagonist to make her feel better by saying that he has done the same: “Mais que je me sois fait ça, à moi!” […] “Vous ne pouvez pas comprendre. Ce sont des choses qui ne doivent pas m’arriver!”28 (1235). But, there is an extra layer of significance to her words other than the mere emphasis on the self; she also seeks to distinguish her ‘superior’ being from “les inférieurs, gauches, mal éduqués, incapables de contrôler leurs gestes, de se servir convenablement de leurs dix doigts” (1238-1239) – the self-less.

Not only do the Consumables have a completely unified sense of themselves because “ils savent qui ils sont” (Tu 1209) and where they stand, unlike those who have “l’esprit tourdu” (1242), but they always manage to turn attention back to themselves, no matter what the subject:

‘Si c’était moi, voilà ce que je ferais’… C’est ce que nous attendions, ça ne pouvait pas manquer… Il observe un instant celui que nous évoquons devant lui, il hoche la tête de

---

28 As a ‘superior’ being, this woman has a particular concern – that all her assets be protected; her beauty must be intact as this is mainly what she is socially worth. It is important for the Consumables to know their value especially since “[c’]est un des signes de [leur] grandeur” (Tu 1278). In this way, it appears that this self-loving woman is consuming herself as “sa relation à elle-même est objectivée et alimentée par des signes, signes qui constituent le Modèle Féminin, lequel constitue le véritable objet de la consommation” (Baudrillard 138-139).
Undoubtedly, such a volte-face is due to the ‘eloquence’ of a self-loving individual as he is always capable of expressing his feelings and labeling them, even if they appear very abstract and obscure: “Quand nous étions emportés, suffoqués, aveuglés, incapables de regarder en nous-mêmes… nous n’avions pas l’impression d’exister… lui ne se perdait pas de vue, il a su trouver que ce qui se passe en lui se nomme ‘souffrance’…” (Tu 1233).

Basically, everything that happens in a self-adoring person’s mind and body is meant to accentuate his being to the point where he becomes so important he needs a body-guard, like a real celebrity: “Celui qui s’aime se scinde en deux… projette au-dehors son double… le place à une certaine distance de lui-même…” (Tu 1238). This doubling is once again a combination of je and moi, where one of them becomes “[un] garde-frontière” (1238) who looks after the other – “ce corps bien-aimé” (1239). This adored physical body recalls what Baudrillard refers to as the resacralization of the body29 (213) and its subsequent transformation into “le mythe directeur d’une éthique de la consommation”30 (213).

In line with the idea of self-formation in the image of an object is a need for authoritative solidity, which is expressed in the form of an edifice. The self-loving person is portrayed as a coherent structure, a building: “[…] solidement construit. Stable. Bien équilibré. Sûr de lui.” (Tu 1250). In other words, the Consumables “sentent que tous les éléments dont ils sont composés sont indissolublement soudés, tous sans distinction… les charmants et les laids, les méchants et les bons, et cet ensemble compact qu’ils appellent ‘je’ ou ‘moi’ possède cette faculté de se dédoubler, de se regarder du dehors et ce qu’il voit, ce ‘je’, il l’aime” (1153). The cohesiveness and solidity of this structure, where everything is unified and compact, is seen as “[t]n énorme bloc d’un seul tenant” (1267).

This imposing building “s’entoure de murailles” (Tu 1170) like a castle or a fortress reinforced by other protective structures, “des fossés profonds, des chemins de ronde, des tours de garde où veillent des sentinelles toujours sur le qui-vive” (1170). The one who loves himself

---

29 “[…] tout témoigne aujourd’hui que le corps est devenu objet de salut. […] Pendant des siècles, on s’est acharné à convaincre les gens qu’ils n’en avaient pas […] , on s’obstine aujourd’hui systématiquement à les convaincre de leur corps.” (Baudrillard 200).

30 The body is represented as the greatest object of consumption by advertising that constantly convinces consumers of the necessity “d’involuer dans [leur] propre corps et de l’investir narcissiquement ‘de l’intérieur’, non pas du tout pour le connaître en profondeur, mais bien, selon une logique toute fétichiste et spectaculaire, pour le constituer, vers l’extérieur, comme objet plus lisse, plus parfait” (Baudrillard 203). This particular relationship with the body is similar to that of the man who admires his hand and of the woman who cuts hers.
“possède un gouvernement [...] un code de lois” (1209) according to which he regulates all the traffic inside and outside the building by imposing certain boundaries: “un cercle [...] a été tracé autour de lui.../ – Par lui-même évidemment./ – Ce sont les limites qu’il ne permet à personne de dépasser. Placées à une juste distance.” (1210). As if acting according to “[un] régime policier”31 (1187), certain emotions, feelings, and words have no right of passage as there are no “centres d’accueil” (1245), no place for second thoughts and reconsiderations:

- Des choses qu’il laisse au-dehors, elles ne doivent pas entrer… des choses qu’on ne discerne pas bien… on ne sait pas ce qu’elles sont, comment les désigner…
- […] tout mou, flageolant, bourbeux, qu’on y mette le pied et on s’enlise… des marécages… […]
- Et il n’y en a pas chez lui, rien où elles puissent se glisser… chez lui tout est propre, net, bien éclairé, rangé, catalogué.” (Tu 1243)

This strange place can be seen as a kind of prison of happiness32 that only keeps what it deems proper inside its walls. The power of the self-loving person is unlimited, even his gaze is controlling, “[un] regard qui nous a rapidement ramassés en un tout et enfermés” (1253-1254). Ironically, this solid structure seems to compensate for and to mask the death of the subject that has taken place in the consumer society.

1.1.2 Personalization

As Baudrillard has professed that real differences have ceased to exist, he also asserted that the real Subject is dead, that authenticity is lost:

La ‘personne’ en valeur absolue, avec ses traits irréductibles et son poids spécifique, telle que toute la tradition occidentale l’a forgée comme mythe organisateur du Sujet, avec ses passions, sa volonté, son caractère ou… sa banalité, cette personne est absente, morte, balayée de notre univers fonctionnel. Et c’est cette personne absente, cette instance perdue qui va se ‘personnaliser’. C’est cet être perdu qui va se reconstituer in abstracto, par la force des signes, dans l’éventail démultiplié des différences […] pour recréer une individualité de synthèse, et au fond pour éclater dans l’anonymat le plus total […]. (Baudrillard 125)

31 “[…] chez lui, pour entrer on doit se soumettre à un contrôle... ” (Tu 1244).

32 This idea is elaborated by Georges Perec, who describes certain characters in his novel Les Choses: une histoire des années soixante as living “dans un monde étrange et chatoyant, l’univers miroitant de la civilisation mercantile, les prisons de l’abondance, les pièges fascinants du bonheur” (67).
Based on this depressing and somewhat ominous statement, the personalization of the subject can be explored thorough two main stages. The first stage is a projection of an acting subject where the Consumable enacts his persona and, in the second stage, the self-loving individuals try to pass themselves off as superior human beings.

As part of fitting in with the theatrical world of consumption, it is important to know how to perform the staging of the model since “ceux chez qui ça [self-love] se montre [sont] [d]es modèles [pour les autres]” (Tu 1156). At times, the self-loving person can act as a model, walking on an imaginary podium. For instance, in one of the scenes in Tu ne t’aimes pas, a Consumable appears as in a photoshoot or an advertising poster. In an attempt to complement his surroundings, he sets a particular atmosphere with his everpresent smile: “… un trottoir mouillé brillant au soleil, bordé de marronniers en fleur, de terrasses de cafés aux auvents baissés… et cette silhouette massive qui s’avance… ce large visage bonasse, souriant, ce regard franc et cette grosse voix chaleureuse…” (1216-1217). This person is very likable and it is not surprising, as we have seen earlier, that he can bifurcate himself to make sure that the image he is projecting is admirable: “[…] il se [voit] complètement du dehors comme un personnage en chair et en os.” (1241). This is all the more justified since the logic of consumption is “une logique de la production et de la manipulation des signifiants sociaux” (Baudrillard 79). As a model and an actor all in one, a Consumable simply needs to enact the various signifiers that will convey a particular message to his observers.

The messages that the self-less public receives are subdivided into a few categories, each pertaining to a particular kind of a model: masculine, feminine or androgynous. Just as Baudrillard describes, “[l]e modèle masculin est celui de l’exigence et du choix” (140). It is rigorous, inflexible, particular and demanding, similar to the previously discussed metaphor of the authoritative structure that keeps everything under severe control: “Savoir choisir et ne pas

33 Mike Featherstone, in his essay “The Body in Consumer Culture”, discusses the contemporary transition from an individual’s character (that is more innate and fixed) to personality (that needs to be built and developed according to an existential notion). He stresses that this transition facilitated the development of an individual as a performer and a role player or even an actor, “a message not just emphasized by self-help manuals, but by advertising and the popular press in the 1920’s. Hollywood provided many of the models for the new ideal with stars marketed as ‘personalities’” (164). Expansion on this subject can be found in (Dyer 96).

34 In his book Advertising as Communication, Gillian Dyer reflects on the role of atmosphere in advertising: “Many ads use colour as an ‘objective correlative’, where the colours of the product [...] are echoed by its surroundings: the décor in a room or a natural setting [...]. The assumption is that the qualities and style of one will enhance the other through this visual link. The people or the world they inhabit in the ad become accessories of the product.” (120). Thus, the surrounding atmosphere of towering sunlit chestnut trees in bloom and welcoming coffee shops enhances the appearance of this large yet ‘good natured’ figure who exudes warmth and spreads smiles and who, in his turn, embodies the formal qualities of happiness.
faillir équivalent […] aux vertus militaires et puritaines: intransigeance, décision, vertu […]” (140). Thus, manly virtues are summed up under the rubric of a ‘strong personality’ and it is in fact what many desire as is pointed out by the self-less protagonist with irony: “C’est cette vie-là qui est la ‘vraie’ vie. La seule dont il soit permis de dire qu’elle ‘mérite d’être vécue’. Celle que vivent les forts, les purs comme lui [the one who loves himself].” (Tu 1267).

The feminine model is of course the opposite of the former: “[…][ce] n’est plus la sélectivité, l’exigence, mais la complaisance et la sollicitude narcissique qui sont de rigueur. Au fond, on continue d’inviter les hommes à jouer au soldat, les femmes à jouer à la poupée avec elles-mêmes.” (Baudrillard 140). Baudrillard further develops the feminine ideal in the following terms:

La femme, vouée aux paraphernalia (aux objets domestiques), remplit non seulement une fonction économique, mais une fonction de prestige, dérivée de l’oisiveté aristocratique ou bourgeoise des femmes qui témoignaient par là du prestige de leur maître: la femme-au-foyer ne produit pas, elle n’a pas d’incidence dans les comptabilités nationales, elle n’est pas recensée comme force productive – c’est qu’elle est vouée à valoir comme force de prestige […].

(Baudrillard 141)

The importance of these lines lies in the emphasis put on the domestic sphere and the aesthetic quality of the woman who is a mere decoration and thus has to preserve her appearance. This description evokes the earlier mentioned self-obsessed woman who cuts her hand (not an object of production but of prestige) while gathering flowers in the garden (a very feminine domain according the stereotypical western norms). Lastly, Baudrillard notes:

[La publicité] a surtout mis en évidence l’émergence d’un “tiers” modèle hermaphrodite, partout lié à l’émergence de l’adolescence et de la jeunesse, ambisexuée et narcissique, […] proche du modèle féminin […]. Ce à quoi on assiste très généralement d’ailleurs aujourd’hui, c’est à l’extension dans tout le champ de la consommation du modèle féminin […]. (Baudrillard 142-143)

This emergence of the androgynous model can be observed in the previously evoked character of the man who looked admiringly at his hand. These signs of love that betray an affiliation to a certain model are not always visible; this is when the real acting comes in.

In the case of the most skilled Consumables, their love takes form “dans l’absence même de […] signes” (Tu 1275). They stage such a natural image that it is impossible to suspect them

---

35 Text X in Tropismes creates a very clear, mocking image of upper-class women Sarraute has in mind, complementing Baudrillard’s remarks on the subject. These women follow the imposed models which were created for them and not by them: “On le leur avait toujours dit. Cela, […] elles le savaient: les sentiments, l’amour, la vie, c’était là leur domaine.” (Tropismes 16). Or to put it simply: “[…] elles […] menaient la vie des femmes” (15).
of inauthenticity. One of the self-loving individuals is seen as “cet instrument perfectionné” (1258), a beautiful object that is slightly tweaked to make it more like the desired self, fully lovable; this is the meaning of ‘naturalness’ in the consumer society. Naturalness is thus just another trope in the overwhelming repertoire of an actor who seeks to convince the self-less that he is “l’unique [,] [l’]incomparable” (1254).

After thorough staging, the enactment of the model is necessary. The Consumables have a particular type of authority, “[comme] ceux qui ont le privilège de posséder une galerie de portraits d’ancêtres et qui se plaisent à faire visiter leur collection” (Tu 1248). As a tour guide of this imaginary gallery, the self-loving person can select certain pieces at whim and attribute their characteristics to his own personality. He can account for the creation of his own character by making references to inspiring figures or to certain traits that he has inherited. In other words, he does not always need to be an actor who plays a specific role; rather he can chose from a range of personalities readily available.

Even the most innocent-looking behavior of the self-loving individuals reveals an undeniable link between theatre and consumption. Particularly telling are “certains spectacles” (Tu 1188) where Consumables try to display their happiness in front of others. One such theatrical performance is similar to a store display: “[…] les mains des amoureux qui ostensiblement devant nous se tendent, se serrent… leur regard qui sous nos yeux s’enfonce, se perd l’un dans l’autre… Et nous nous amusons en les observant… c’est pour nous qu’ils dressent cet étalage… une belle vitrine où ils exposent leur bonheur…” (1188). The theatrical stage thus becomes a storefront window, and vice-versa, where items are laid out in attractive and often emotionally charged displays to elicit the attention of passersby. This “Bonheur affiché” (1188)
tries to provoke desire of the self-less: “On dirait un chien qu’on taquine avec un morceau de sucre, ses yeux luisent, sa bave coule, il saute en l’air, se tend…” (1189).

The most important part of the enactment of the model is for the actor to have at least “[un] petit talent” (Tu 1255) in the art of self-love so that he can take on a different role to represent more effectively his superior status. For example, the opposition between the ones who love themselves and the self-less is often enacted as a family drama where the Consumable acts as “le parent dont l’enfant s’est mal conduit” (1249). The self-less protagonist is constantly subjugated to the superior power of the self-loving individuals.

To be perceived by the masses as a superior human being, it is essential to enact that through both appearance and expression. This performance needs to carefully infiltrate the consumer society, as consumers who endow the self-loving individuals with the superior status “sont […] inconscients […]. C’est à ce titre qu’ils sont partout exaltés, flattés, chantés […] [et] […] ainsi on reconnaît [leur] souveraineté” (Baudrillard 122). Since their power is thus deemed unlimited, it is their own desires that create a universe where “[l]es hommes seront des dieux les uns pour les autres” (Girard 125).

In terms of appearances, establishing superiority means not displaying any weakness and being in total control. Consequently, those who love themselves are full of “determination […] [et] force” (Tu 1240) accompanied “[d’u]n air d’indulgence dédaigneuse” (1237). This behavior is justified since in consumer society only those who love themselves are considered healthy: “[…] ne pas s’aimer, soi, [est] une tare, une maladie…” (1151). Not loving oneself is seen as “[une] hypertrophie” (1155), a sign of inferiority and exclusion. Thus, any one of the Consumables, as a superior being, can dictate to others proper ways of behaving, as if the self-less were “privés de volonté, hypnotisés” (1195): “[…] son amour d’elle-même si absolu, si puissant qui s’èpand d’elle et se communique à tous autour d’elle…” (1256-1257). Through this hypnosis, the self-adoring individuals become the opressors: “Vous savez bien que ces fortes personnalités nous envahissent entièrement… Une puissance occupante qui nous soumet à sa loi… nous ne pouvons qu’obéir à ses ordres…” (1194).

“L’homme exceptionnel” (Tu 1263), while in reality succumbing to weakness in the face of unrequited love 39, will never admit his defeat, covering it up with a resistant personality: “[…] j’ai plutôt un tempérament de chasseur… ou de chien de chasse… ce qui fuit m’excite, j’ai envie de m’en emparer… Et puis, une fois je le tiens… et même quand je ne le tiens pas…

39 “Heureux! Sans lui! C’est impossible… Vous savez bien, ‘un seul être vous manque et tout est dépeuplé’… ” (Tu 1252).
Eh bien, assez rapidement…’ Il fait ce geste de la main qui signifie le rejet, l’insouciance.” (1253). This personality is fully in line with the quickly changing attitudes of consumer society, a taste for trends and new adventures. While using clichés to retain one’s superior status might seem like a poor strategy, it is effective in the eyes of many: “Plus rien nulle part n’est à nous. Tout est à lui. Il est le maître absolu, il fait partout ce que bon lui semble…” (1263).

The one who loves himself is elevated to the stature of a god. Any compliments addressed to such a person become “des offrandes” (Tu 1256), as if they were a religious offering given either to a deity or to another kind of “souverain” (1255). Moreover, for the ‘genius in the art of love’, any designation seems too limited to denote fully his superior nature: “‘L’amour de lui-même’ est trop petit…/ – Même ‘Un amour sans nom’ ne recouvre pas…/ – Tous les mots qui se présentent ne sont pas de taille.” (1277). The self-admiring person is free (1267) to the point where “[l]e Ciel même ne peut pas lui dicter sa loi” (1276); he himself performs Heavenly functions:

– Y a-t-il pour lui quelque chose qui doit être nommé le Mal, le Bien?
– En tout cas, lui seul a le pouvoir de le nommer.
– Dès qu’il est là, nous l’avons vu, nous le savons, plus rien nulle part n’a d’autre existence que celle qu’il lui donne.
– Personne n’a sa certitude. Une certitude aussi absolue. Une aussi inébranlable assurance. (Tu 1276)

This definition of good and evil is very subjective, a product molded by the Consumables who alone have the right to express themselves. And thus, what might be advantageous for any one of the self-loving representatives is a disaster for the self-less: “– Des radiations… nous étions tous irradiés…^40/ – L’amour qu’elle a pour elle-même nous avait contaminés… […]/ – Les autres, atteints comme nous l’étions, il ne paraît pas possible de les sauver.” (Tu 1260). This contamination is in part due to the subliminal power of the words (like that of advertising) pronounced by the one who loves himself.41 Besides the hypnotizing and irradiating spells, a

^40 In the text XXII of Tropismes, Sarraute describes a scene where a passerby is irradiated by the allure of objects: “[…] il regardait à travers une vitre claire […] d’où, chauds, pleins, lourds d’une mystérieuse densité, des objets luijetaient une parcelle – à lui aussi, bien qu’il fût inconnu et étranger – de leur rayonnement […]” (Tropismes 30).

^41 “– Nous ne sommes plus rien qu’un regard fixé sur lui, des oreilles attentives à ses ordres…/ – Pas des ordres criés à voix haute… c’est ici que s’arrête la comparaison… ses paroles s’insinuent en nous doucement et elles nous forcent…/ – Oui, plus que des ordres, des menaces implicites de sanctions… elles nous forcent par l’effet d’une étrange fascination à regarder sans ciller, sans nous en détourner une seconde…” (Tu 1158).
self-adoring person is also capable of deforming the identity of the self-less protagonist by affixing a particular type of personality to him that is reductive and inauthentic, but which fits a particular consumption model:

- Il a pu sentir glisser en nous un mouvement qui s’est révélé au-dehors par un mot, une intonation, un plissement de nos paupières, de nos lèvres…
- Et ce mouvement, il l’a figé, il l’a détaché, conservé, étiqueté, il lui a trouvé un nom. Le nom qu’on donne à un certain trait de caractère… […]
- Un seul lui a peut-être suffi… un de ces noyaux autour duquel toute une personnalité s’érige…
- Une personnalité qui n’est pas celle qui devrait être attribuée à notre délégué… (Tu 1221)

Instead of discovering different facets of the self-less protagonist, the powerful self-loving magician prefers isolating a specific trait which he perceives as essential (but which in fact could be completely deceiving, since much of what one perceives is dependent on a personal and biased interpretation). He then applies this essentialization as a restrictive label to the protagonist’s identity. All this labeling of personalities as well as the pronouncements emphasizing love and self-importance become “un emballage digne des objets qu’il offre à ceux qui savent les apprécier… [q]ui vont pieusement les conserver […] comme des décorations, comme des diplômés qu’ils placèrent sous verre” (1161). Words become precious gifts as if endowed by a saintly person; they have obtained religious power and unquestionable status.\(^42\) With all their magical and sacred powers, a solid dose of narcissism and theatrical training, the self-loving individuals (the Consumables) in Sarraute’s novel become a clear allegory for the new religion of the consumer society, namely, advertising. They try to pull the self-less into their universe, indicating the ‘right’ directions with their contradictory arrows of triangular desire, causing complete social disequilibrium inside the Kleean rectangle; to retain social equilibrium, the individual needs to be reanimated from this externally constructed, inauthentic state.

1.2 The Inconsumables

Inconsumables are people like the self-less protagonist of the novel; while often entranced and captivated by the Consumables, they are also able to consume like them; but unlike them, they

\(^{42}\) “– Ces paroles produisent en nous ce que certains textes sacrés produisent chez des croyants… ils sont surpris, déconcertés, mais vite ils se soumettent, ça les dépasse, qui sommes-nous pour nous permettre? ils se signent pieusement, comment avons-nous pu oser? que ça nous soit pardonné…/ – Nous nous inclinons, nous acceptons, il n’est pas question que nous puissions le mettre en doute.” (Tu 1258).
resist being consumed by others because they have preserved something that the self-loving individuals have not. The Inconsumables embrace the multiplicity of voices within them and, in particular, they are conscious of a certain voice of reason that demasks the inauthentic behavior of the others. Both the Consumables and the Inconsumables are the products of the death of the Subject. The former decided to reconstruct an alluring and solid identity from the decay that remained, while the latter preferred to retain the deconstructed and polyphonic burgeoning of identities that could never be reassembled in a single unit. This phenomenon (even though in reference to fiction) is accurately described by Maurice Nadeau in his essay “L’évolution du roman” where he speaks of the anonymous ‘je’ in the novels of Sarraute: “L’homme s’est découvert des contradictions, des mouvances inexplicables de sentiments, des impulsions bizarres, des désirs hors de sa portée, une solitude irrémédiable ou un besoin de contacts qui ne pouvaient plus être enfermés dans la même enveloppe individuelle. Le ‘personnage de roman’ a craqué et s’est effrité.” (94).

1.2.1 Multiplicity of voices

The multiplicity of voices that characterizes the Inconsumables in general and the protagonist-narrator of the novel in particular comes through an undefinable identity and the many contradictory selves that all vie for attention.

The impossibility of constituting a precise identity is closely connected with the fact that the self-less protagonist acknowledges his being through an internal gaze, rummaging “dans [son] mouvante immensité” (Tu 1191). He is only capable of conceiving an immaterial and fluid self: “[…] entre nous, quel est ce corps dont vous parlez ? Quelle est cette âme ? Et qu’est-ce que ce soi-même?” (1191). Since the self is perceived as immaterial, the notion of the body is denied as well as that of the soul, which is constructed as its opposite; the problem is that without a body there is no coherent image: “Si nous avions des corps, des visages, on pourrait nous voir en foule nous bousculant, nous serrant les uns contre les autres” (1219). Thus, those who do not love themselves are sometimes described as a big, empty (1218), wall-less space: “[…] il n’y a en eux aucune chambre aux trésors, pas de coffre-fort, rien où accrocher des décorations, des diplômes… […] [seulement] un espace ouvert de tous côtés que tous ces beaux cadeaux ne font que traverser…” (1161). At other times, the self-less protagonist is seen as a chaotic and

43 “Il n’y avait en nous aucune image de nous-mêmes…” (Tu 1199).
disorderly inner place: “– Nous ne faisons jamais l’inventaire.../ – Comment pourrions-nous le faire dans cet immense bric-à-brac, cet entassement, ce désordre ?” (1221).

Moreover, the plurivocal ‘I’ is represented as “une nature insouciante” (Tu 1168) that is not attached to objects and could easily let go of any material possessions. The only conscious attachment that the self-less protagonist retains is his nostalgic memories of the earlier time, unaffected by the reign of the Consumables: “[…] quelques bribes, des vestiges de ce qui nous avait appartenu quand nous étions chez nous… Un petit pont en dos d’âne au-dessus d’une eau verdâtre… les courbes dorées d’une coupole… une fontaine sur une petite place pavée de grandes dalles soyeuses…” (1264). Once again, the immateriality of the constitutive substance is underscored.

But even when we pass from internal ruminations to outward expression, it is impossible to unify all the different voices into one since they are textually separated into different enunciations:

– C’est tout mou, flageolant, bourbeux, qu’on y mette le pied et on s’enlise… des marécages…
– De la soude caustique où l’on va se dissoudre…
– Un grouillement de choses fuyantes qui se cachent dans des trous sombres, des fentes humides… (Tu 1243)

Despite the fact that there is a certain fluidity to all three statements (leading one to believe that they could all be expressed by one voice), each voice seeks to distinguish itself from the others, creating the internal polyphony which is also reinforced by the lexical references to softness, wobbliness, muddiness, and overall instability of the marshy and viscous personal terrain. In such slippery grounds, “rien ne porte de nom. Personne n’exerce aucune fonction. Il n’y a ici ni père ni mère” (1245). The Inconsumables are “êtres de fuite” (1250) who escape any method of containment or specific definition. If a portrait of such an immaterial and fluid self were attempted, it would be that of a non-gendered, decentralized, alternative self. It is no surprise that the text itself “s’écrit dans une permanente tension entre la profusion désordonnée et cacophonique du sujet” (Le Roman dialogué 187).

The self-less protagonist is composed of many different representatives, most of them are referred to by a neutral masculine form of ‘il’ or by an indeterminate ‘je’; sometimes, a
masculine presence reveals itself in the narration and so does the feminine. Thus, the Inconsumable protagonist is composed of a mixture of masculine and feminine identities enmeshed together. Instead of creating a coherent personality that hides all the discordant selves, the self-less narrator prefers to keep it unsorted: “Chez nous on peut trouver de tout... il y a en nous tant de rayons avec tant de produits de toutes sortes.../ – Nous pouvons fournir à la demande.../ – Dans ces stocks, ces réserves que d’ordinaire nous évitons autant que possible d’inspecter... si on s’en approche trop longtemps, de trop près, on a l’impression de se rétrécir, d’étouffer...” (Tu 1193). Anyone can create an attractive personality from a reserve of different masks, but those who do not love themselves find the process of searching through these endless closet-shelves stifling and painful. Hence, they prefer to forget about all these personalizing products and to revert to their empty, disorderly state where chaos reigns: “[u]n tel manque de cohésion, une telle absence de discipline... de pouvoir central...” (1209).

The decentralization of the self-less protagonist is provoked by the fact that a singular pronoun can no longer describe the many selves that compose him: “Comme des bancs de poissons de même espèce, des vols d’oiseaux qui se déplacent d’un même mouvement, des groupements dont les membres ont les mêmes tendances... Leur appliquer un ‘tu’, un ‘je’... non, nous ne le pouvions plus... il fallait un ‘nous’, un ‘vous’.” (Tu 1203). This idea of ‘us’ and plural ‘you’ informs the transition from internal monologues to internal dialogues that illuminate the nature of the narrator:

– ‘Vous ne vous aimez pas.’ Mais comment ça ? Comment est-ce possible ? Vous ne vous aimez pas ? Qui n’aime pas qui ?

– Toi, bien sûr... c’est un vous de politesse, un vous qui ne s’adressait qu’à toi.

– A moi ? Moi seul ? Pas à vous tous qui êtes moi... et nous sommes un si grand nombre... ‘une personnalité complexe’... comme toutes les autres... Alors qui doit aimer qui dans tout ça ? (Tu 1149)

These internal dialogues both verbally and formally question the stability and the singularity of the protagonist’s personality and rightfully so, since according to one of his delegates the self is unfathomable: “[...] il y en a tant [de personnes en ‘moi’]... comme des étoiles dans le ciel...”

44 “Depuis que j’étais petit [...].” (Tu 1151).

45 “Ce que je me serai amusée [...].” (Tu 1234).

46 The ellipsis that follows this statement playfully signifies its evident lack of certainty and attests to the fact that the identity of the self-less protagonist is uncertain.
toujours d’autres apparaissent dont on ne soupçonnait pas l’existence… […] je suis l’univers entier, toutes les virtualités, tous les possibles… l’œil ne le perçoit pas, ça s’étend à l’infini…” (1155). Sarraute’s ellipsis, which in this case confirms and enhances the quality of infinity, in other cases creates uncertainty and a troubling effect that emphasize how problematic such extensive identity can be: “— Ce n’est pas à nous tous que ce ‘nous’ s’applique… Nous ne sommes jamais au complet… il y en a toujours parmi nous qui sommeillent, paressent, se distraient, s’écartent…” (1150). Even the designation ‘nous’ presupposes that there could be an infinite number of other ‘nous’ inside the same person. In this inner space, teeming with overwhelming possibilities, what can be seen by the self-adoring people as “manque de conviction, de persuasion, […] une indécision, une mollesse” (1222) is in fact an unusual strength. “Ce manque de ‘conscience de soi’, cette impossibilité de savoir qui nous sommes” (1192) is actually a type of consciousness most resilient to the pressure from the Consumables and hence advertising, as it resists pre-packaging of identity.

As a result of this discovery, an alternative individual is produced. Not only is his identity undefinable but his sentiments are also unnamed: “— Ce que nous ressentons n’est inscrit nulle part…/ — Ça passé… ni vu ni connu…” (Tu 1232-1233). With uncharted personal borders and with absence of clear emotional labels, the question arises: “[…] cette masse, comment peut-elle s’aimer ? ni d’ailleurs se détester ?” (1152). What the Inconsumable protagonist sees inside of himself is very different from what others can ever imagine: “… tant de jeunes gens fringants, d’adolescents se rassemblant chez des ‘vieillards croulants’ et tant de vieillards chez des jeunes… et partout tant d’enfants…”47 (1165). Aside from children and old people, there is a whole range of other individuals inside the self-less narrator: “[…] les pleutres, les honteux, les fiers, les courageux, les coupables qui aspirent à la confession, l’expiation, ceux qui se réfugient dans le secret, ceux qui ont le goût du martyr, ceux qui ne craignent rien autant que de souffrir…” (1218); the list is endless since the one who does not love himself is a being “plein de contradictions” (1169), a collective of limitless abstractions.

While these contradictory selves can be resistant to consumerism, they can also be seduced by it; and this seduction often takes on the form of the desire to be like the other. This phenomenon can certainly be explained since “l’astuce de la publicité est précisément […] de toucher chacun en fonction des autres” (Baudrillard 86). Not only are human needs conditioned

47 If this description of proliferation of children inside oneself can be seen as a reference to the ever-present childish spirit, then it could become a form of resistance to the power of advertising, since a child’s purity would render an individual partially indifferent to the discourses on self-love and personalization. In this way, the childish gullibility that served to edify the Consumables through belief in fairy tales might be opposed with childish disinterestedness.
(97) since “LE SYSTÈME DES BESOINS est LE PRODUIT DU SYSTÈME DE PRODUCTION” (103), but what is worse, is that they become greater by dint of competition: “Lorsque tout l’univers social s’urbanise, lorsque la communication se fait totale, les ‘besoins’ croissent selon une asymptote verticale – non par appétit, mais par concurrence.”48 (87). René Girard was correct in saying that “[p]our qu’un vaniteux désire un objet il suffit de le convaincre que cet objet est déjà désiré par un tiers [le médiateur] auquel s’attache un certain prestige” (16). In Tu ne t’aimes pas, the self-less protagonist occupies the place of the vain, desiring subject; the mediators are the self-adoring people and the object of desire is happiness. According to Girard’s theory, however, this triangular relationship is further complicated by the fact that it is not the above-mentioned object of desire that is really desired: “Le désir selon l’Autre est toujours le désir d’être un Autre.” (89). In other words, mimetic desire is the desire of perfection attributed to the mediator and unlike the fulfillment of a particular need, this type of desire has an infinite character and is thus illusory. Therefore, even if a certain object of desire is attained, the complete satisfaction will never be, since the earlier object will always be replaced by new ones.

This desire to be like the other is revealed in different ways in Tu ne t’aimes pas; some emanations of the self-less protagonist try to obtain happiness in hopes of gaining proximity to their model: “Efforçons-nous […] d’être avec eux… comme eux. Imaginons que nous sommes, nous aussi, dedans [inside of happiness]…” (Tu 1178). Others think that their own perfection depends on the overall unity of their persona and thus, they are attracted by the fake images projected onto them by one of the Consumables: “Ils sont trop fascinés par cette image que visiblement l’autre contemple… elle doit être admirable, séduisante… ce ne peut être celle de notre délégué… c’est évidemment celle de quelqu’un que l’autre a fabriqué et mis à sa place…” (1224). Such complacent behaviour is also represented by a feminine emanation which shocks many of her Inconsumable co-habitants by uttering: “Ce que je me serai amusée” (1234). The disturbing force of this phrase comes from the tense of the verb: “[La force vient de] ‘serai’ évidemment. De ce futur venu se nicher au cœur du présent…” (1234). This use of the future anterior tense is rife with advertising possibilities; it is like a wishfulfilling prophecy that Baudrillard evoked: “– Pendant que nous sommes là à dépenser sans compter, à gaspiller étourdiment, de vrais paniers percés, elle songe à l’avenir et elle fait un bon placement… ‘Ce que je me serai amusée…’ / – L’instant présent ne vaut que par ce qu’il contient de promesses…”

48 Baudrillard further explains: “[…] le discours de la ville, c’est la concurrence même: mobiles, désirs, rencontres, stimuli, verdict incessant des autres, érotisation continuelle, information, sollicitation publicitaire: tout cela compose une sorte de destin abstrait de participation collective, sur un fond réel de concurrence généralisée.” (87).
(1234-1235). When this feminine emanation (alternatively described as ‘elle’ and ‘il’ (1233-1234) and as the ‘self-loving individual’) detaches herself from the group, her behavior seems to indicate that one is always a product of the society: “N’est-il pas comme l’enfant qui brusquement, en plein jeu, quitte ses camarades, court vers sa mère, en reçoit un baiser et revient rassuré, fortifié…” (1233). If the mother is the society that raises its citizens, that is to say consumer society, then it is only from consumption that stems reassurance of existence; one consumes, therefore, one exists is the new cogito.

Such absurdity and weakness on the part of some of the self-less protagonist’s emanations are not tolerated for long since disagreeing points of view emerge and re-problematize the inner landscape: “– On voit apparaître en nous un désordre, un désarroi…/ – Une mêlée entre ceux qui voudraient la repousser, cette image, l’écraser, et ceux qui acceptent, qui désirent qu’elle se montre…” (Tu 1217). While some emanations voice their desire to see “[u]ne belle image [d’eux-mêmes]” (1154), others don’t care if it is beautiful as long as it is “une image de nous-mêmes que nous aimerions telle qu’elle est” (1154); some call their inability to love themselves “cette particularité” (1154) while others refer to it as “cette infirmité” (1154). Certain ‘nous’ perceive themselves as “dignes, courageux, […] adroits” (1151), while certain others still are worried that they are “défavorisés […] [et] mal doués” (1153). The disagreements are as localized as the differentiating opinions on happiness where some find it suffocating and as globalized as the inability to accept their outwardly appearance: “– Notre délégué…/ – Votre délégué…/ – Mais nous l’avions tous accepté.” (1216). Despite the internal chaos, some are assured that they will never be subjugated under the power of the oppressor: “[…] il y a une chose dont on peut être certain, c’est que cela ne nous arrivera plus jamais.” (1202). But their assurance is quickly underminded, as some have reasons to doubt: “Avec nous on ne peut vraiment jurer de rien… Il n’est pas impossible qu’un beau jour nous retombions entre ses mains…” (1202). Even though most inner interactions continue in this pattern of disagreement, in some cases irony has the last word, provoking new beginnings: “– […] Quel Bonheur ce serait de l’imiter…/ – Mais êtes-vous fous? Mais vous ne le dites pas sérieusement? L’imiter? Nous?/ – Non… pas en construisant une aussi superbe statue… Mais seulement une statue… si modeste soit-elle…/ – Oh oui, quel apaisement…” (1166-1167).

49 “[…] ça [happiness] nous a donné par moments de la claustrophobie… nous voulions sortir…” (Tu 1179).
1.2.2 Voice of reason

Constant quarrels and recourse to irony finally build up into a desire to set things straight and consequently culminate in a real resistance to superficial love and a reconsideration of the external world. This process begins with the construction of self in the negative, that is by opposition to the self-adoring person: “[…] entre celui qui s’aime et nous quelle différence…” (Tu 1205).

One of the sections that contrasts the self-loving person and the self-less individual deals with remorse. It portrays two kinds of guilt: guilt towards others and guilt towards self. In the case of the one who loves himself, “ces bras tendus vers lui” (Tu 1247) are external: “[…] ça me donne des remords, la façon dont je me suis conduit, ce que j’ai fait… ou pas fait plutôt… Je n’ai pas recueilli chez moi ma mère malade… J’ai refusé de m’occuper de mon enfant… J’ai été égoïste.” (1247). But this sentiment of guilt is a passing one as the past tense of “J’ai été égoïste” indicates and very soon the Consumable turns back to himself, forgetting any regret: “C’est toujours vers lui-même qu’il se retourne, c’est lui-même qu’il regarde…” (1248). In fact, “[c]’est eux, plutôt que lui-même, qu’il a l’air de moins aimer pour lui avoir montré leurs bras suppliants, pour lui avoir fait entendre leurs appels” (1248). On the other hand, the self-less protagonist seems to portray a different kind of remorse: “C’est quelque chose que nous avons nous-mêmes créé…” (1246); “– Toujours ces mêmes bras décharnés qui se tendent, ces yeux déteints d’où coulent des larmes, cette voix qui tremble… ‘Emmène-moi…’ / – D’autres fois ce sont les sanglots, les supplications, les bras tendus vers nous d’un enfant…” (1246). The Inconsumable narrator is also plagued by voices of the young and the old who have been abandoned, but unlike those tormenting the self-adoring person, these voices could be the internal emanations of the different ‘nous’ that are part of the ‘je’. In a sense then, the remorse of the narrator is ironic, as it indicates the neglect of certain caprices of the self and not of the pleas for help coming from others. The moral dimension thus becomes reversed and instead of ‘remorse’, the right feeling would be that of ‘accomplishment’:

– Et nous les avons laissés devenir ce qu’ils sont restés pour toujours… ces bras impuisants tendus vers nous, ces appels déchirants… […]
– Fait d’une matière sans mélange, qui porte un nom que chacun connaît : ‘Abandon.’
– C’est entré en nous et ça fait partie de nous…” (Tu 1247)
Desires have become compactly compressed into a package, marked with ‘Abandon’, left to gather dust. The self-less protagonist has chosen to neglect and ultimately ignore the various self-created “needs” that arise within him.

When this is accomplished, it becomes easier to turn away from the influx of commodified happiness\(^{50}\) that defines the Consumables. When the different representatives of the self-less narrator try to establish their own rapport with what is generally called “le Bonheur”, they fail miserably, realizing that appropriating this term to describe their own experiences would be a lie:

- Il aurait fallu pouvoir revenir à soi, se retrouver, […], se regarder… […] choisir Bonheur et calmement déclarer que ce sont des instants de Bonheur que nous sommes en train de vivre…
- \(\text{Mais}^{51}\) c’est cela justement qui ne nous est pas possible…
- Aucun nom amené du dehors ne s’est donc posé sur ces instants. Ils n’ont pas reçu le baptême… ils demeurent pour toujours dans les limbes… (\(Tu\ 1175-1176\))

They cannot possibly name the feeling of happiness, which becomes their strength: “– \(\text{Mais}\) ne nous désolons pas. Reconnaissions plutôt que notre inaptitude à ‘connaître le Bonheur’ nous donne parfois quelques avantages…/ – C’en est un déjà de ne pas être obligés de plaquer ce nom de Bonheur sur toute sensation encore intacte, vivante… de l’écraser…” (1187). Stemming perhaps from the negation of happiness, the same tendency is expanded to other domains where naming becomes impossible: “Quand ils [those who love themselves] venaient nous dire que ce qui nous arrivait, c’était ‘un amour partagé’, cela produisait en nous un trouble, une gêne…” (1227). In fact, this shared love is further refuted by the self-less, a decision partially anchored by the fact that “[leurs] flots agités toujours changeants ne peuvent porter aucun nom” (1232).

Along with the disappearance of labels comes real uncertainty: “– Qu’est-ce que c’est tout à coup… comme un doute… une insatisfaction…/ – Ah toujours vos scrupules…” (\(Tu\)

\(^{50}\) In her essay “Le bonheur de l’homme”, Sarraute demasks happiness as it is “un mot ensorcelé” (qtd. in Fauchereau 61): “[…] pour nous aider à la [la félicité] trouver, que de conseils, que de recettes! Nous n’avons que l’embarras du choix. Chacun doit déployer tous ses efforts pour obtenir ce qu’à chaque instant on lui propose: les résultats sont assurés. Les camelots du bonheur se partagent la clientèle. […] On nous propose des modèles de toutes sortes, bien conçus, édifiés selon des règles éprouvées; il suffira de savoir choisir et d’être prêts à payer le prix – car rien, bien sûr, ne nous est donné gratuitement – pour s’installer à demeure dans l’une de ces constructions confortables et harmonieuses.” (59). She suggests that only “l’aveuglement et le conformisme” (61) would make someone affirm that he possesses happiness. Fortunately, the self-less protagonist chooses to escape this fate.

\(^{51}\) According to Marie-Hélène Boblet, “‘Mais’ figure la résistance de celui qui n’est finalement ni si heureux ni si fier de ne s’aime pas, alors que ceux qui s’aient lui paraissent de vulgaires pharisiens” (\(Le Roman dialogué\) 183).
This time the doubtful nature of the self-less reveals itself not as a weakness but as a direct weapon against commodification and its unifying simplification. Mockingly, some of the self-less delegates propose an alternative statue of the self in the form of “un bonhomme de neige” (1170), a ‘sculpture’ that is constantly changing under the effects of the environment. Their statue would be a snowman that melts, transforms, deforms, and finally becomes an indiscernible fluid mass. Such a statue cannot hold for a long time any of the adornments attributed to it by stylists, “la pipe qu’on plante au milieu du visage… le chapeau de feutre qu’on pose sur la tête” (1170). These accoutrements become silly and absurd on an entity that eludes a coherent form: “C’est cette absence autour de nous de frontières, de bornes… chez nous entre qui veut…” (1170). The self-less being finds his ultimate representation in the absence of boundaries, where nothing prevents him from expanding, growing and maturing: “On dirait que notre immense masse mouvante s’était encore accrue… était plus dense, plus vibrante… elle s’épandait, elle couvrait de plus vastes espaces, elle les enserrait de plus près, elle adhérait à eux avec plus de force…” (1227).

This accumulated force has recourse to different strategies in its refusal to be subjugated. Realizing that the image of the self-less protagonist is often externally constructed without his consent\(^2\), it becomes clear that the power of resistance may be obtained through the understanding of these construction methods. Since the self-absorbed person constructs himself and others in the form of effigies, these images can be manipulated as well as resisted by the power of words. This realization, accompanied by the lexical field of war\(^3\), outlines a definitive competition between the Consumables and the Inconsumables that takes place on the battlefield of wits.

Representatives of the self-less narrator do not want to live in the world constructed by the rules of the other; they would rather be referred to as “des hors-la-loi” (Tu 1245) than be subjugated, having to conform to an impoverished society of deceptive happiness and abundance:

- […] nous ne faisons pas partie de ces foules moutonnères qui défilent sur les vieux petits ponts, se penchent sur les eaux glauques, lèvent le nez pour contempler les courbes des coupoles se découpant sur le ciel bleu, font claquer leurs lèvres en signe

\(^{52}\) “[…] ce n’est pas nous qui avons fourni les matériaux avec lesquels on nous fabrique […]” (Tu 1220).

\(^{53}\) “une opération chimique”, “le réactif versé”, “la fatalité”, “notre exécution”, “la fosse commune où ils entrent les lâches, les traîtres, les ennemis” (Tu 1219-1220).
d’appréciation quand ils passent la main le long des rebords arrondis des fontaines, foncés, graissés par tant d’attouchements…

– Nous voyons, nous aussi, comme là-bas tout est recouvert d’une mince couche, d’une pellicule…

– Faite de tous ces contacts, descriptions et reproductions. […]

– Tout ce qu’on arrive à dire, c’est qu’on sent quand on le regarde une déception… un manque… (Tu 1265)

To combat the vacuousness of such existence, resistance of the self-less narrator to his self-loving opponents sometimes takes on the form of disguise, where camouflage is necessary in order to penetrate the enemy’s camp: “[…] nous avons réussi à paraître, nous aussi, un modèle que les gens contemplaient, dont les gens du dehors s’inspiraient…/ – Le loup déguisé en mèregrand…” (Tu 1179). So while temporarily presenting a unified image of his selves, the self-less protagonist also affirms his image as a dangerous competitor who can trick and destroy the gullible Consumables. This trickery, however, is not simple since it requires numerous attempts directed at diverting the gaze of the self-loving persons. By sending delegates who would appear similar to the Consumables, the self-less protagonist and ‘his troops’ hope to render the self-admiring individual completely uninterested in them. What takes place is thus similar to a fashion show, where “le défilé de délégués se poursuit” (1222). At one point it is “[un des] plus convaincus, plus passionnés” (1222) who is chosen to represent everyone; then it is “un ‘Je’ frivole, léger” (1222), followed by “un ‘Je’ qui montre qu’il est solidement installé sur cette terre, qu’il a du bon sens, l’esprit clair” (1222). The list goes on, since “[il] y en a de toute sorte… […] vantards, menteurs, cancaniers…” (1223), all revealed in an attempt to gain a sense of transparency (a seemingly ‘easy to understand personality’ that would not require further scrutiny of gaze, letting it pass through uninterruptedly) so that the Consumable may cease to ‘see’ the Inconsumable. Despite all the arduous attempts, this offensive fails:

– Quelqu’un qui a notre aspect, qui porte notre nom, qui a le même signalement, est pris pour nous, inculpé, arrêté et emprisonné…

– Entièrement au pouvoir de son unique geôlier… Condamné à vie…

– Non, là s’arrête la comparaison. C’est une prison dont nous pouvons nous évader… Ne jamais plus nous en approcher… (Tu 1223)

After these lines that lament the failure of simulation, a small page break follows, signaling the beginning of a new segment and the formation of a new consciousness: “Déjà nous
nous en éloignons, de cette prison et de son gardien…” (Tu 1223). The Consumables cannot be overcome by the blind imitation that the self-less protagonist puts forward but only by escaping the prison of his own unifying body as well as the prison of influence of the self-adoring people. After the rupture, a moment of calm realization follows: “– Nous voilà de nouveau coiffés de notre précieux bonnet…/ – Ce bonnet magique qui rend invisibles les héros des contes de fées.” (1223-1224). While the Inconsumables are compared to a fairy tale hero who symbolizes the good that triumphs over evil (Consumables), the metaphorical magical bonnet does not designate some supernatural power granted externally to the one who does not love himself; rather it represents his own ability to do magic with words that become his protective cloak: “Les paroles que nous jugeons bon de faire entrer en eux [those who love themselves], ils les reçoivent comme il se doit, ils les examinent, ils ne s’en laissent pas distraire…” (1223). As the self-less protagonist gradually attains invisibility through words, his sense of security is further reestablished through a reminder that the self has limitless resources: “– Contre nous ils ne peuvent rien…/ – Nous, il n’y a pas moyen d’en venir à bout…” (1220). The self-conscious narrator is set to win the battle by refusing to be reduced to “cette poupée […] [,] ce mannequin qu’ils ont construit” (1219).

The process of reconsideration of the external world follows, propelled by a reassessment of the other and the self. What comes to the fore are methods of suspicion and exclusion, “les expériences sarrautiennes par excellence, expériences empruntées au processus et à l’univers judiciaires” (Le Roman dialogué 174). Thus, the Inconsumables act as lawyers and a search for truth begins with the endless questions: “Comment font-ils pour se sentir si nets, si simples?” (Tu 1164); “Il s’aime véritablement? Ce qui s’appelle s’aimer?” (1153); “– Il est naturel que celui qui s’aime, toujours occupé à prendre bien soin de lui-même, se soit toujours tendu vers le Bonheur de toutes ses forces…/ – Mais vers quel Bonheur? N’y en a-t-il pas pour tous les goûts? de toutes les sortes?” (1176). Upon questioning this preconceived notion of happiness and realizing that its artificial character is reflected in the personality of the self-adoring person, the self-less narrator desires to demonstrate his feelings towards this impostor through an analogy, where he is the son confronting the figure of the father who represents consumer society, the Consumables: “– […] ce n’est pas de la jalousie qu’il sentait chez son père […]/ – […] ce que ce fils voit chez son père éveille en lui ce qui se nomme ‘pitié’. C’est bien le nom que cela porte… Son père lui fait pitié. Un sentiment qu’il est choquant d’éprouver envers son père…” (1244-

54 “[…] il y a dans ses yeux, dans le mouvement de ses lèvres quelque chose de faux, de fuyant… […] quelque chose de rusé…” (Tu 1261).
Not only does the Inconsumable protagonist feel pity towards his antithetical opponent, but he also mocks the ease with which the latter imposes words on everything around him:

- C’est curieux, en nous servant de ces ‘Je t’aime’, ‘Tu m’aimes?’, nous étions un peu étonnés de ne pas pouvoir tout à fait garder notre sérieux, nous sentions qu’un sourire affleurerait à nos yeux, à nos lèvres…
- Il devait venir de l’impression confuse que nous avions d’être des enfants qui jouent…
- C’est ça, des enfants qui s’amusent à imiter les grandes personnes.
- Nous pouvions aussi jouer aux portraits. Le ‘Je’ se plaçant à distance du ‘Tu’ et l’observant… Isolant ce qui apparaît ici ou là, le rassemblant, le désignant… ‘Tu sais ce que tu es? Tu es la bonté même. Qui est plus généreux que toi?’ (Tu 1229)

It appears that childishness and playfulness become “la menace, […] le danger” (Tu 1215) for the ‘unshakable’ foundation of the Consumables. In spite of this danger, one of the women who loves herself chooses to be around the self-less protagonist because “elle sait où est le bien, où est le mal” (1259). Interestingly enough, this statement could have a dual signification. Does she know that being surrounded by those who do not love themselves is beneficial, as they support her ego, or is it because they remind her that being an object of consumption in the unreal world is degrading and destabilizing, making her question whether this excessive self-love is “une faute grave […] un crime” (1284)?

Upon further reflection on his own role, the self-less protagonist realizes that in spite or rather because of his fluid character, he can withstand any attack on the part of the Consumables. After being completely overcome with the words of an old poem, the one who does not love himself comes back to reality as if it were “[le] réveil de la Belle au bois dormant”55 (Tu 1198). This seemingly innocent poem serves in fact as a myse en abyme of the character of self-less protagonist himself: “C’est un de ces modestes, qui d’ailleurs ne manquent pas de dons…” (1199). This analogy between the poem and the multifaceted self is explored even further when he reflects on how to approach a poetic text: “[…] on [ne] peut [pas] juger un texte, en examinant un mot, et puis un autre, pris ici ou là, séparé du reste…” (1200). The self-less narrator cannot be defined except in his entirety and since he is made up of limitless voices, their unification is impossible; his poetic flow will never be labeled with a particular theme or style.

---

55 Borgomano suggests that the joyful transformations from the fairy tale realm take on a somber shade in Sarraute’s work: “le réveil de la Belle au Bois Dormant est un dur retour à la réalité” (70). Instead of being happily awakened from a death-like sleep, the self-less protagonist abandons his poetic paradise to return to the antagonistic world full of self-adoring individuals.
Having better understood the differences between the self-loving and the self-less, the protagonist has to dig deeper to reveal the neglected truth. As usual, it comes in many layers, for there is never a single homogenous message. The first morsel of truth is that the relationship between the two always threatens to be destructive. For instance when one of the emanations of the self-less protagonist pronounces the name of one of the Consumables, he vicariously benefits from his status: “[…] quand tu as cité son nom […] tu as grandi, tu es devenu celui qui a eu l’honneur de renconrer…” (Tu 1163). But, Consumables who engage the self-less protagonist make him an accessory: “[…] là-bas, en eux, […] nous sommes, un diplômé, un décoré […] nous réduits à cela […] Nous si nombreux… incernables… incommensurables…” (1163). To stop this vicious cycle, desire needs to be eliminated. Thus, in the eyes of the self-less narrator, the one who loves himself slowly starts to take on the form of an undesirable, substanceless structure: “[…] une de ces maisons isolées, un cube de ciment sans jardin…” (1265). “– Ici […] le regard peut vagabonder dans ces immenses plaines vides, errer distrairement sur ces murs nus, glisser le long de ces lignes droites…/ – Pas d’objets séduisants qui nous attirent, s’accrochent à nous…/ – Nous tiennent à cœur… nous parlent au cœur…” (1266-1267). Upon a thorough inspection of the space, the only object found is “[une] grosse et grise poupée de caoutchouc […] lourde, inerte” (1180) that engenders all the boredom deeply hidden and repressed inside what is constituted as Happiness. Ironically, the self-adoring person, so full of ‘love’ and yet so empty, inhabits “ces étendues sans fin” (1282) and insatiably feeds on endless desires. What follows is a revolutionary upheaval against the impostor:

Ici ce n’est pas le Bonheur… c’est un nom usurpé… il n’y a rien ici de ce que ce nom doit désigner. Ah ce n’est pas nous qui avons jamais été intimidés par trop de somptuosité, obnubilés par ce grand nom… Nous le savions, nous l’avons toujours su, c’est… vous savez ce que c’est, votre Bonheur? son vrai nom est Château en Espagne. (Tu 1180)

56 “C’est en effet le fantôme de la sincérité perdue qui hante toute cette amicalité du contact, ce perpétuel “en direct avec…”, ce jeu et ce forcing du dialogue à tout prix. La relation authentique est perdue, vive la sincérité!” (Baudrillard 276).

57 “…cette attitude hautaine est […] une compensation… Elle fait contrepoids… Des romanciers l’ont vu, ils l’ont montré. Évidemment dans la vie on est bien obligé de se fier aux apparences.” (Tu 1271). Aside from once again demasking the real nature of the Consumables, this connection between fiction and reality, which is emphasized by the self-reflexiveness of Sarrautian novel, demonstrates that what is written in the novel has relevance to the real world and thus to consumer society.
This general Happiness is revealed as an impossible ideal that needs to be deconstructed once and for all: “[…] nos ‘eternels enfants’ qui naturellement veulent aussitôt s’amuser⁵⁸ à démolir leur jouet: ils défont brutalement le Bonheur pièce par pièce, pour voir comment c’est fait…” (1180). This deconstruction is essential because “[p]arfois le Bonheur enfermé en un bloc épais dans un livre vient frapper toute une population” (1190). Thus, Sarraute contrasts this traditional thick block with a set of dense passages that contest this notion, underlining the catastrophic problems it poses (1190-1191). The self-less protagonist hopes to save “ces victimes du ‘Bonheur’” (1189), “les plus croyants, les vrais fidèles gardiens du culte” (1189), as if they were believers of some religious sect. In reality, however, they are simply seduced by advertising in the same way as he was once tempted: “Nous avons été entraînés… vous savez combien nous sommes influençables, crédules… Alors toutes ces réclames, cette continuelle propagande, ces illustres modèles exposés, ces conseils, ces encouragements, ces récits de ceux qui s’y trouvent⁵⁹… on n’a pas pu y résister…” (1178). In spite of this strong propulsion towards the world of desire, a few of the emanations of the self-less protagonist affirm that being protected from it is much more rewarding: “– Après ce mauvais rêve, quel délice de se retrouver chez nous…/ – Comme c’est doux de se rejoindre, de se confondre, se fonder…” (1231).

⁵⁸ This amusing deconstruction begins by making fun of the possibility of the quick attainment of happiness (“– Un instant… attendez… je crois que je vais y arriver… Voilà… j’y suis… je sens que je m’aime… ” (Tu 1183)) and is augmented in a mini-play between the innter-voices of the self-less narrator that satirises the absurd nature of this generic Happiness that can sell anything to anyone; it is like a parody of an adage that sets in motion human existence:

Et voici devant moi le Bonheur… […]

– Il suffit que se soit ce qui porte ce nom: Bonheur… ce que tout le monde désigne ainsi… que cela possède les qualités qui font que chacun en le voyant le reconnaisse aussitôt, que chacun s’écrit ‘Ah, mais c’est le Bonheur!’ Et ce Bonheur s’ouvre devant moi… Et moi je mérite autant et plus que quiconque d’y entrer. D’y rester…

– Tu peux dire aussi que sans lui, sans le Bonheur, ta vie ne vaudrait pas la peine d’être vécue.

– Ah merci de me venir en aïde…

– Eh bien voilà, ce pour quoi je suis fait…ce qui donne tout son prix à ma vie… (Tu 1183-1184)

In the end, the sensation of ‘happiness’ is never found and all that is left is an incoherent mass of feelings: “une inquiétude? […] une terrible tension? […] une déception?” (1187).

⁵⁹ “On voit partout la publicité mimer les modes de communication proches, intimistes, personnels. Elle essaie de parler à la ménagère le langage de la ménagère d’en face, elle essaie de parler au cadre ou à la secrétaire comme son patron ou son collègue, elle essaie de parler à chacun de nous comme son ami, ou son surmoi, ou comme une voix intérieure, sur le mode de la confession.” (Baudrillard 256).
Despite the effort, all the attempts to make others know and understand the pathetic state of their situation, as molded by the power of commercial models – the Consumables, fail completely because the majority does not want to hear; “[ils veulent] empêcher que la vérité entre” (Tu 1278), preferring to propagate the myths of consumption: Perfection, Unity, Happiness… Liberation against their will cannot succeed: “– On ne peut que le répéter sans fin…/ – Seulement pour nous. Pas pour essayer de nous faire entendre./ – Redire: c’est de l’amour qu’il a pour soi que tout est venu.” (1283). The one who loves himself uses his love as a control tool, “[passé] de lui à eux [ceux qui l’admirent] comme un câble, une corde solide qui sort de lui et les entoure, les soutient, les maintient droits appuyés les uns sur les autres” (1285).

This cord is a clasp by which advertising holds its victims, “[des] molles poupées […] [de] son” (1285), preventing them from seeing the real face of capitalism – “une idéologie démocratique globale, qui masque la démocratie absente et l’égalité introuvable” (Baudrillard 61).

In face of such disbelief from others, it appears necessary to retrieve one’s own voice of reason. Amidst all others, it is the ‘clown’ who is “une exception” (Tu 1152), and he metaphorically becomes the voice of consciousness and the voice of reason for the self-less protagonist. He is the emanation that seems to know all the right answers like a scholar in a philosophical dialogue.

All over the world, throughout history, clowns have been seen as having “an elusive character” (Otto 1). They were considered marginal social beings, not unlike lepers, dwarfs, and

---

60 “Écoutez, vous êtes tous atteints, contaminés, c’est comme des virus qu’il propage…/ – Comme des radiations invisibles qui émanent de lui… elles agissent même à des grandes distances…” (Tu 1278); “– […] cet amour qu’il a pour lui-même, un amour infini qui déborde de lui…/ – Qui suinte, filtre, s’infiltre en vous, vous remplit…” (1277). “C’est de son regard à lui comme d’un pistolet que ça a jailli, cette couche de vernis qui nivelle, qui aplanit…” (1281). “– […] Revenez à vous, il vous a hypnotisé, vous êtes obnubilé… il s’est emparé de vous, il s’est emparé du monde entier. Il n’y a rien au monde qui ne porte sa marque…/ – La marque la plus réputée. Et alors vous trouverez à tout ce qu’il apprécie une saveur exquise, une qualité… c’est un effet bien connu, vous savez, très répandu…” (1282).

61 The self-less protagonist is surprised at the hypermetropia of the blind followers, at their inability to see that which is too evident “comme dans ce jeu où l’on cherche, on ne trouve pas l’objet qui est là devant vous, qui crève les yeux…” (Tu 1239). But after the surprise comes the realization that “[u]n tel amour… si parfait, si pur que personne ne le voit…/ – Pour le voir, il faudrait d’abord cesser de l’aimer” (1283). But their love knows no limits and it is impossible to evacuate the overarching love that the Consummables irradiate, “[c]et amour inaltérable [qui] continuera à se répandre” (1285); the only counterattack that seems feasible is to assure the victims that they can reappropriate the power that has been taken away from them by advertising through a careful self-examination aimed at unearthing a multiplicity of voices: “mais ça peut être à vous de nouveau… ne vous rétractez pas… étendez votre main, posez dessus la paume de votre main d’enfant où la peau est toute neuve, sensible…” (1281). Only through conscious sensitivity and internalized gaze can this regime of oppression be overturned.

"Écoutez, vous êtes tous atteints, contaminés, c’est comme des virus qu’il propage…/ – Comme des radiations invisibles qui émanent de lui… elles agissent même à des grandes distances…” (Tu 1278); “– […] cet amour qu’il a pour lui-même, un amour infini qui déborde de lui…/ – Qui suinte, filtre, s’infiltre en vous, vous remplit…” (1277). “C’est de son regard à lui comme d’un pistolet que ça a jailli, cette couche de vernis qui nivelle, qui aplanit…” (1281). “– […] Revenez à vous, il vous a hypnotisé, vous êtes obnubilé… il s’est emparé de vous, il s’est emparé du monde entier. Il n’y a rien au monde qui ne porte sa marque…/ – La marque la plus réputée. Et alors vous trouverez à tout ce qu’il apprécie une saveur exquise, une qualité… c’est un effet bien connu, vous savez, très répandu…” (1282).
crazy people, but despite such a handicap, they have always been associated with the truth. They could “challenge without threatening” (268) as “jesters [were] adept at being involved and detached simultaneously, living at the very heart of the action while remaining in a symbolic sense peripheral” (231). In quoting Henrik Birnbaum, Beatrice Otto also mentions that in Russia for example, skomorokhi, alternative to court jesters who also performed magic tricks and puppet shows, were considered a part of the “counterculture that existed beneath the surface of officialdom” (11). Clowns played an important role in subverting and questioning; and it is their voices that were heard and left a mark.

In Tu ne t’aimes pas, at first the clown appears as a “juggling, riddling, leaping, mocking magician” (Otto 264) because his words are absorbed by the self-adoring people like “un philtre qui faisait apparaître devant eux une de ces images […] auxquelles ils sont habitués, d’une simplicité toute classique” (Tu 1150). An image that is familiar and simplified at once captivates the Consumables and frustrates the other emanations of the self-less protagonist who are outraged by this seemingly degrading performance:

[….] notre visage, que tu leur faisais voir… pas un de ceux qui nous apparaissent dans les glaces, sur les photographies, pas un de nos visages composés, l’œil fixe, les traits disposés au meilleur de leur forme… mais ce visage aplati avec sur les lèvres mollement étirées, dans les yeux quelque chose d’humble, de honteux… […] un pitre, un clown grotesque… gaffeur comme pas un… et craintif avec ça, sans défense… tu pouvais des soupirs… “Ah que voulez-vous, je suis ainsi fait, je n’en fais jamais d’autres… Incorrigible… Depuis que j’étais petit, j’ai toujours admiré, j’ai contemplé avec envie ceux qui ont cette chance… qui ne sont pas comme moi…” (Tu 1150-1151)

What both sides are missing, however, is the fact that the clown’s performance could be a mockery of the Consumables who are fully happy and satisfied with themselves, or the clown could be revealing the very complexity of the self-less protagonist through the ambiguity of language. While at first sight it seems that he is saying that he has always admired the Consumables who are capable of loving themselves, what he could in fact be saying is that he has always admired those other ‘moi’ which are not like him. Some of these other emanations of the protagonist could in fact love themselves and thus ‘ceux’ could be internally directed.

---

62 “Jesters were generally by their nature straightforward and honest and did not tend to have vested interests or belong to formal power structures or informal cliques.” (Otto131).

63 Interestingly enough Boblet, uses circus metaphors to link language and action in the conclusion of her essay on Tu ne t’aimes pas: “L’épreuve de la parole, la confrontation à l’autrui laisse la part belle aux traces de l’hétérogénéité, de l’altérité, aux arabesques du moi dans ses acrobaties verbales. Tu ne t’aimes pas rend compte de la richesse, de la plasticité du sujet et de l’inventivité des relations intersubjectives, qui ne fige pas le mouvement en une forme préfigurée.” (Le Roman dialogué 190).
revealing to the self-adoring listeners the multiplicity of contradictory selves within the self-less narrator. In fact, the clown could be trying to show the consuming ‘rulers’ of his universe their foolishness in believing that complete coherence and unity of an individual could exist. This subversive nature of the clown can be supported by the following statement of the buffoon himself: “[…] j’ai été faire le pitre. J’ai voulu servir de bouffon … chez eux, apparentem, cet emploi n’est rempli par personne. Ou peut-être, si quelqu’un, chez eux, voulait s’y risquer, ceux qui sont porteurs de dignité, de prudence, seraient assez forts pour empêcher qu’il sorte… Mais de là à croire qu’ils s’aient…” (1152-1153). The clown emphasizes that mere refusal to be silly and playful beyond concern for one’s image or, in other words, ‘to make a fool out of oneself’ does not mean that a person really loves himself. Moreover, he chooses to be a clown and he is empowered since foolishness is not imposed on him. Thus, through seemingly apolitical actions, the clown challenges the fact that the Consumables really love themselves.

The clown is not only a voice of reason: he also sees through the fakeness of his surroundings. While it is difficult to identify which voice is his in the plethora of different opinions, it seems reasonable to suggest that the ironic or disputing statements can be attributed to him. In one such exchange the anonymous voice that ironically reveals the tropes of advertising sounds like his: “— Ceux qui s’aient ont une grande chance… Mais ce n’est pas une chance… c’est ce qu’ils nous diraient… c’est un état naturel, ils s’aient sans même y penser, ils s’aient comme on respire…” (Tu 1152). The clownsque voice makes fun of the two registers of commercial discourse: the idea of luck or destiny that is part of the self-fulfilling prophesy of advertising and the idea of something that is so natural that it simply enhances the already beautiful self. In fact, all that the Consumables deem natural is nothing but a pure construction.

64 In her text “Bouffonneries”, which is not limited to the study of Tu ne t’aimes pas, Evelyne Thoizet-Loiseau identifies the role of some of Sarraute’s characters as needing to “faire le bouffon pour amadouer le puissant, pour le séduire en le faisant rire et pour le faire retomber des hauteurs factices où il s’est retiré” (50).

65 The clown emanation is also mirrored in one of the scenes of the novel by a cetain self-less visitor who reveals dissimulation engendered by a self-loving person named Robert. This brave stranger is deemed “le porteur de la vérité… d’une vérité irréfutable…” (Tu 1171). Consequently, he is someone special: “il peut être quelqu’un de réputé pour sa subtilité… ou quelqu’un qui n’a que du gros bon sens… ou quelqu’un qui en manque… et alors il a sûrement ces dons de visionnaire des aliénés… enfin n’importe qui se transforme en psychologue profond, en voyante, en pythie…” (1171). This person, who is either subtle or silly and who is able to bring to light refined hypocrisy and “un regard faux” (1173) of the perfect Robert, reinforces the meaning behind the image of the clown that is otherwise only implied in the text.

66 Banville’s poem “Le Clown” includes the following lines that serve to support the clown’s point of view: “Il marche sur les fiers sommets/ Ou sur la corde ignoble, mais/ Au-dessus des fronts de la foule.” (qtd. in Starobinski 34). This clown-acrobat, similarly to the Sarrautean clown, can be seen as superior to the general public, being above it, having a broader view of the situation and courageously questioning certain societal norms.
Understanding this state of things, the clownesque voice can also question the naïve beliefs of other self-less emanations, even if only subtly, by means of intonation or facial expression:

“– […] ceux qui s’aiment vivent mieux./ – C’est certain…” (1152). The ellipsis of this statement points again to the uncertainty of what is perceived by many to be certain and aside from creating doubt, it also displays certain irreverence, often witnessed in jesters’ discourse (Otto 159). Due to his constant skepticism, some other emanations accuse the clown of preventing them from perceiving themselves as complete entities as seen by the self-admiring people:

“[…] toi le démolisseur67… tu as toujours envie de les déformer, ces images [complètes de nous], de les détruire… de les empêcher de se collier sur nous, d’adhérer partout…” (Tu 1153). But while the clown serves as a scapegoat for some, others understand that a coherent image is impossible even without his intervention: “[…] elles [the images] glissent sur nous, elles n’adhèrent pas, tout ce qui remue en nous les fait bouger, elles ne peuvent pas se fixer.” (1154). Therefore, the clown is yet again revealed as the truth-telling hero who presents an authentic self rather than a fake but attractive image. Even when he projects “des caricatures, des images clownesques, grotesques… ce cou qui s’allonge, se tend, ces yeux qui se tendent, un peu exorbités… interrogant, attendant” (1214) and continues to inquire whether the accusation of a lack of self-love is a hurtful statement, truth is revealed. And while some still make fun of the silliness of these questions that seem to simply entertaining the Consumables68, the clown is in fact asking these questions mockingly, knowing full well that the self-less protagonist’s lack of love is not a malfunction and simply trying to make the others realize it as well.69

Yet another ambivalent situation, disappointingly represented by some voices of the self-less protagonist, demonstrates the fine art of what the clown can do, tricking everyone at the

---

67 In Baudelaire’s time, the body was considered the source of evil and the pious public often went to the circus among other places “pour voir les corps chercher, glorieusement, vainement, leur rédemption par le mouvement” (Starobinski 64). In a way, then, the clown is someone who brings salvation by escaping a stable, coherent, unified body image, one that resists the resacralization of the body in the consumer society.

68 Many see “[une] performance” (Tu 1150) of the clown as pure amusement that displays “[leur] manque de sérieux” (1231) : “– C’était donc pour rire…/ – Nos diablotins facétieux s’étaient emparés de lui, ils lui avaient fait pousser le jeu trop loin…” (1230). However, what in fact is most often produced by his performance is “[le] malaise” (Thoizet-Loiseau 53) instead of laughter. Consequently, the clown has the power to disequilibrate the outward stability of the Consumables through his silliness.

69 “Le clown est le révélateur qui porte la condition humaine à l’amère conscience d’elle-même […] il éveillera le spectateur à la connaissance du rôle pitoyable que chacun de nous joue à son insu dans la comédie du monde.” (Starobinski 109).
same time: “Vous vous êtes emparés d’un des écriteaux dont ils se servent et vous l’avez accroché à votre cou, vous avez revêtu la tenue qu’ils ont préparé pour ceux comme vous” (Tu 1287). While seemingly following the lead of the Consumables, the clown’s entrance is accompanied by unexpected screams and self-accusations of a pathological lack of love that bother those who love themselves (1287), perhaps by placing a seed of doubt in their minds about their own love; however, the Consumables do not react; and, at first sight, it seems that all has failed: “Supporter l’image du clown triste resté seul au milieu de l’estrade, son numéro n’a pas marché, il suit des yeux les spectateurs se hâtant vers la sortie, détournant pudiquement les yeux…” (1288). Nonetheless, in presenting oneself as a unified clownesque entity the self-less protagonist produced something similar to admiration (1290); perhaps, it is a sense of admiration for his courage to oppose the Consumables by being so imperfect.

While there may still be some doubt among the many emanations of the self-less protagonist in regards to the clown’s success in disseminating the truth and resisting his opponent, there is a unanimous understanding that his approach is the only one that may eventually be heard. When the self-less protagonist is once again assailed by one of the Consumables, every part of the ‘nous’ resists this commodification and tries to foster another image of the self, which is synonymous with the fool, the clown – the idiot: “Vous faites affleurer à notre visage un air idiot, de notre bouche vous faites jaillir des paroles inéptes, des rires grossiers…” (Tu 1226). Jean Starobinski in his book Portrait de l’artiste en saltimbanque, summarizes very well this playful ability of the fool to trouble and subvert:

70 “Il se déguise sans cesse, passe pour un menteur quand il dit la vérité, pour un être sincère quand il ment. De plus, le bouffon n’est jamais bouffon à part entière; il ne colle jamais tout à fait à son rôle […].” (Thoizet-Loiseau 65).

71 “[…] c’est le bouffon de cour, qui dédramatise les situations en faisant rire mais qui est aussi le garant du pouvoir royal […].[…] Il se ploie pour mieux se déployer, s’abaisse […] pour mieux se redresser, il emploie les expressions les plus familières pour montrer sa maîtrise du langage […][,] Quand le bouffon accepte de mimer le reflet que les autres lui renvoient de lui-même, c’est paradoxalement pour accroître sa propre puissance […].” (Thoizet-Loiseau 63-64).

72 “[Cette] ‘sortie’ involontaire n’avait pas provoqué chez eux ce qu’il aurait fallu attendre, pas la plus faible rétorsion, l’ébauche d’une rebuffade. Et même…” (Tu 1289).

73 “Nous n’étions qu’un seul élément traversé par un seul mouvement…” (Tu 1289).

74 “Perhaps self-love may be best attained in self-loss – he who loses his life will gain it – as New Testament teachings and mystical religions have professed.” (Ramsay 801).

75 The only other option considered by the self-less protagonist is escape (Tu 1226), which is a non-communicational solution.

76 “Nous voici enfermés, cette fois dans une de ces cages dorées, palaces, paquebots, sanatoriums de grand luxe… nous-mêmes un produit luxueux, préservé, arrangé, nettoyé, frotté, poli…” (Tu 1226).
[...] il faut [...] accorder [au clown] la licence de n’être rien de plus qu’un jeu insensé. La gratuité, l’absence de signification est [...] [son] air natal. [...] Le non-sens dont le clown est porteur prend alors, en un second temps, valeur de mise en question; c’est un défi porté au sérieux de nos certitudes. [...] il nie tous les systèmes d’affirmation préexistants, il introduit, dans la cohérence massive de l’ordre établi, le vide grâce auquel le spectateur, enfin séparé de lui-même, peut rire de sa propre lourdeur. (Starobinski 141-144)

The clown, in addition to his playful and mischievous nature, can also be seen as *un je insensé* compared to *ils* (the Consumables); perhaps, this incoherent *je* is the only sane voice.

Overall, one could compare this theatrical experience of clownesque appearance and of role-switching, where the Inconsumable becomes the actor and the Consumables the spectators, to the carnivalesque activity described by Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin states: “[…] carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.” (10). Moreover, “[t]his experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms” (10-11). By this somewhat chaotic, deregulated behaviour, the clown attempts to destroy the unified stronghold of the Consumables and to establish the authenticity of multiplicity. Since, according to Bakhtin, during the carnival “[p]eople were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations” (10), individuals in consumer society could be reanimated by embracing their ‘inner-carnival’.

It is important to add one more dimension to the figure of the truth-telling, unpredictable, multifaceted, self-conscious and socially conscientious clown, that of the author.77 According to Starobinski, “[d]epuis le romantisme […] le bouffon, le saltimbanque et le clown ont été les images hyperboliques et volontairement *déformantes* que les artistes78 se sont plu à donner d’eux-mêmes et de la condition de l’art” (Starobinski 9). Not just painters, but also writers choose the clown as “[leur] porte-parole” (19). In the case of Nathalie Sarraute, an

---

77 Lucie Jauvin, among others, in her article “L'autoportrait virtuel et universel de Nathalie Sarraute”, suggests that there is a link between the self-less narrator of *Tu ne t'aimes pas* and the author.

78 “For Klee, the circus was a theatre of the world […] [where] circus performances were not mere amusements, but also allegories for the life of the artist and hence his own life. In the acrobats, trick riders, jugglers, and most especially, the tightrope walkers, he saw the embodiment of the artist’s risky existence – the courage, the hope for success, but also the risk and danger involved in a fall that could be fatal.” (*Theatre Everywhere* 156). Thus, the artist facing constant “instability of the situation” (156) appeared mirrored in the circus-themed works which, in their turn, took on the appearance of self-portraits (156). Calder (whose work serves as the cover image for *C’est beau*) treated this subject matter similarly: “His magical [circus] dramaturgies are veritable allegories of the artist’s tragic solitude, because like the mercurial acrobat, the artist surrenders body and soul to risky gestures through which he expresses his brilliance, in order to take flight toward his ideal, toward freedom.” (*The Paris Years* 109).
autobiographical parallel may be drawn not specifically through the voice of the clown but rather through the self-less narrator as a whole with whom she has a certain affinity. Sarraute creates the following image of herself in an interview with Simone Benmussa:

Je n’ai pas de sentiment d’identité. […] On a plusieurs ‘je’ sociaux qui vous représentent, mais à l’intérieur, je n’ai pas ce sentiment de ceux qui s’adorent, qui se retrouvent sur eux-mêmes, qui se regardent… il n’y a plus de ‘je’. Il y a en nous toutes les virtualités. […] […] quand les gens vous disent : ‘Moi, je suis comme ça…’ Comment peut-on le dire? Il y a toujours une multitude en nous, puisque nous sommes si nombreux… et qui souffle. Dès que je dis ‘je’, j’ai l’impression de ne jamais parler de moi, ou très rarement. (Qui êtes-vous 81-82)

This connection between the author and the protagonist points to that fact that Sarraute has a definite predelection for the Inconsumables and hence a certain social position which she has always denied. She also emphasizes the authenticity of the self-less individual by stating that in fact “tout le monde est comme ça [multiple], mais les autres [ceux qui s’aiment] jouent, ils se placent le plus souvent ‘au-dehors’, là où les différences existent” (83).

And so, we find ourselves overwhelmed in this consumer society of difference where everything can be objectified and reified: a moment “tout chaud, bouillonnant… […] recueilli et congelé, mis en conserves” (Tu 1234) and even words: “On s’amusait ainsi par moments et puis on mélangait tout ça, tous ces mots avec lesquels on avait joué, comme on mèlait les dés, les jetons, les cartes et les range en vrac jusqu’à la prochaine fois…” (1229). In this museum of happiness and abundance, no one should be left unsatisfied: “Partout, l’individu est invité d’abord à se plaire, à se complaire. Il est entendu que c’est en se plaisant à soi-même qu’on a toutes chances de plaire aux autres.” (Baudrillard 138). It is not surprising then that not loving oneself is “surtout un reproche, un blâme pas seulement pour le tort que nous nous faisons à nous, mais pour ce que nous leur faisons subir, à eux” (Tu 1290). The love for the self and

---

79 “Il y a aujourd’hui tout autour de nous une espèce d’évidence fantastique de la consommation et de l’abondance, constituée par la multiplication des objets, des services, des biens matériels, et qui constitue une sorte de mutation fondamentale dans l’écologie de l’espèce humaine. A proprement parler, les hommes de l’opulence ne sont plus tellement environnés, comme ils le furent de tout temps, par d’autres hommes que par des OBJETS.” (Baudrillard 17).

80 “Ce qui était fragile, périssable, qui se serait décomposé, aurait disparu… elle a su le sauvegarder… Elle l’a embaumé, elle l’a exposé dans un cercueil de verre […]” (Tu 1235).

81 “Il a pu reconnaître à cette tiédeur humide à ce chatouillement sur ses joues qu’il versait des larmes… il a conservé cela et il l’exhibe maintenant : ‘Je pleurais’… ” (Tu 1233).

82 “Dans ce réseau de relations anxieuses où il n’y a plus de valeur absolue, mais seulement de la compatibilité fonctionnelle, il ne s’agit plus de ‘s’imposer’, de ‘faire ses preuves’ […], mais de trouver le contact et l’approbation
happiness are required to assure the wellbeing of the consumer system itself, to propel its motor of mimetic desire. This is a sad but realistic image of the consumer society in which “non seulement la relation aux autres, mais aussi la relation à soi-même deviennent une relation consommée” (Baudrillard 138). In this inhumane society, where everything can be objectified by the Consumables, is “[la] tragique condition” (Tu 1225) of the self-less protagonist really tragic?

Perhaps, the words that the one who does not love himself has received from the self-adoring person can be seen as a compliment and not as an insult, “de vrais crachats [au visage]” (1213). As the final lines conclude once again on a note of uncertainty\textsuperscript{83} and plurivocality, there is nonetheless a sense that self-love is not the only option and certainly not the best: “– Comme ce serait bon pour tout le monde… comme tout le monde y trouverait son compte si on pouvait, nous aussi, l’éprouver, cet amour de soi… […]/ – On ne demanderait pas mieux…/ – On ne demanderait pas mieux?/ – Pas mieux? Vraiment?” (1291). But most importantly, “[la fin] laisse d’ailleurs le destinataire choisir sa propre option, le renvoyant à sa propre intériorité dialogique” (Le Roman dialogué 53), underlining the multiplicity of selves that needs to be reanimated and consulted before taking a particular position.

\textsuperscript{83} In Tu ne t’aimes pas, like in many post-1950s novels, according to Marie-Hélène Boblet, “le débat reste ouvert, le lecteur reste face à la question. Ce roman cultive la proposition probable d’opinions, plutôt que la thèse confondue avec la vérité, il spécule et fait passer l’intelligence en faisant circuler la parole. On le voit, plutôt que d’un roman à thèse, il s’agit d’un roman de questionnement, d’un roman dialogique à thèses.” (Le Roman dialogué 53).
2 Chapter: Restoration and Reconstruction of Language (C’est beau)

According to John Rothenberg, Sarrautean characters should not be perceived as “a focus of interest in [themselves]” but rather as “element[s] in dramatic structure” (“The Problem” 37); in other words, they are simply a support for the underlying tropisms. This interpretation is supported by Sarraute who has repeatedly stated that in her work there are only dramatic figures who react to external stimuli and activate problematic interactions; they are nothing but “porteurs de mouvements” (“Le Gant” 1710).

It is perhaps for this reason that a reproduction of Calder’s motorized 1936 sculpture Petit panneau bleu adorns the cover of the Folio edition of C’est beau. This choice is justified since “[a]lthough not the first to make sculpture move, Calder was the first to create an art of motion” (Calder’s Universe 253). This particular piece, set on a white stage against a blue backdrop, features a small yellow circle next to a vertically positioned amorphous rotating shape with alternating pointed black and rounded red sides. These bold abstract shapes, however, do not cease to evoke a real theatrical performance even if on a smaller scale.

As part of Calder’s greater involvement with ballet and theatre in 1930s (Marter 159), when he created décors for various productions and “maquettes for large motorized ballets” (165), theatrical mobiles started to emerge, each one an “objet-spectacle” (“Petit panneau”) in its own right. With these new developments, emerged Calder’s growing “concern for the equilibrium of space and surface, and the idea of non-symmetrical balance” (Fineberg 46) as well as the constantly changing relationship between the parts of the whole:

[...] a complex choreography [...] [i]s achieved as [t]he shape of the elements changes from side to side, and each surface is painted a different color so, as an object spins, both its shape and color mutate. Unless at rest, the elements never assume the same relationship with one another. [...] [T]hus, these works reveal themselves through time. By placing panels on the wall Calder controlled the background against which his elements were viewed, establishing the color relationships he desired as well as the optimum distance between the elements and the vertical plane behind them. He could in this way more effectively manipulate the shadows, which multiply the actions of the elements. (Prather et al. 67)

Thus, Calder’s mechanized miniature sculptures are in line with what Dominique Jamet has described as a ballet of perfect choreography in Sarraute’s plays (qtd. in Œuvres 2019) where time, movement and sound84 all contribute to the realization of the scene.

84 In the case of Calder’s motorized mobiles, the sound comes from the buzzing of the motor (Prather et al. 61).
In *C’est beau*, where the conflict emerges between what could be referred to as the yellow (the son), the black (the father) and the red (the mother) factions, what at first sight seems to be sparked by either generational or aesthetic differences becomes largely a matter of expression or the lack thereof. As such, we experience a transition from the study of the individual fragmentation in *Tu ne t’aimes pas* to the linguistic one in *C’est beau*.

To reveal how language is restored and reconstructed by Sarraute, this chapter will begin with the examination of clichés. Starting with an analysis of what it means to say “C’est beau”, two main issues will be addressed, namely what is said and what is not said, in order to bring awareness to what superficial appreciation can hide. Consequently, language will be revealed as a trompe-l’oeil that is systematically kitschified, thus contributing to the loss of authenticity and lack of understanding. This will serve as a transition to the exploration of the social discourse of conformism which, through reflexive and restrictive expression, propagates passive consumption of ready-made language and adherence to particular social groups through mimicry and synchronization. Verbalization of resistance to the clichés will be achieved through the redefinition of “thick description”, a term borrowed from Clifford Geertz, which will be discussed later. Strategies of abstraction and extension will be emphasized as part of reflection on the nature of the play, the various absences that make up its structure and the ways they are filled by silence. To conclude, Sarraute’s process of accumulation and decentrement will be articulated though her ability to reappropriate excess via thick description and achieve undecidability with the help of paradigmatic writing.

### 2.1 Clichés

There are few people today who would dare question the notion that we live in an affluent society. Issues pertaining to social poverty rarely arise outside of the circles of social workers or

---

85 This description is evocative of Calder’s mobile featured on the cover of *C’est beau*. Staged here is the small circle reminiscent of the son positioned at a distance from the black protruding shape with sharp angles possibly referencing his father who is ready to consume everything with his impending totalitarian shadow. The red smooth shape, closely intertwined with the black object, could be representative of the mother, whose views are largely those of her spouse even though she attempts to “smooth” things out and to be closer to her son.

86 Samuel Weber’s discussion of Kierkegaard's theatricality and its *dramaturgical* quality could be easily applied to Sarraute’s writing. Weber states that “the position of the writer is not so much that of directing or realizing, but rather of setting things into motion” (Weber). He explains that in Kierkegaard's writing “there is no one voice or perspective that dominates the whole” and further underlines that “central perspective […] is there primarily to be broken up and disrupted” and thus, “such interruptive structuring effects [sic.] the very unity of words. The most significant words break down into different and often incongruous multiple meanings. And there is no one voice, no proper name that can gather them into a single unity. Instead, there is a complex interplay of multiple possibilities” (Weber).
conversations concerning third world countries. It seems so obvious. But perhaps it is time to reconsider.

In refuting certain ideas that John Galbraith proposed in his book the *Affluent Society*, Baudrillard sees much further ahead than the industrial age which the former described, opening our eyes towards the problems of the post-industrial phenomenon:

Considérer que le système vit de déséquilibre et de pénurie structurelle, que sa logique, et ceci non pas conjoncturellement, mais structurellement, est totalement ambivalente: le système ne se soutient que de produire la richesse ET la pauvreté, que de produire autant de dissatisfactions que de satisfactions, autant de nuisances que de “progrès”. Sa seule logique est de survivre, et sa stratégie dans ce sens est de maintenir la société humaine en porte à faux, en déficit perpétuel. On sait que le système s’est traditionnellement et puissamment aidé de la guerre pour survivre et ressusciter. Aujourd’hui les mécanismes et les fonctions de la guerre sont intégrés au système économique et aux mécanismes de la vie quotidienne. (Baudrillard 70)

While these mechanisms of the poverty-producing machine are not readily visible, they are ubiquitous precisely because unnoticeable and fully integrated: “Si la pauvreté, si les nuisances sont irréductibles, c’est qu’elles sont partout ailleurs que dans les quartiers pauvres, non pas dans les slums ou les bidonvilles, mais dans la structure socio-économique.” (Baudrillard 71). As part of the socio-economic sphere, the cultural element is perhaps affected the most by this depletion. Culture has become substituted with mass culture, excluding cultivation and knowledge and alloting preference to passing fashions and constantly changing tastes. In such a society, works of art are comparable “‘à la paire de bas et au fauteuil de jardin’, et prennent leur sens par rapport à ceux-ci” (160) or else, they become mere signs of prestige. Thus, not only objects are consumed, but so are humans (as is illustrated in *Tu ne t’aimes pas*) and language. After all, “la consommation est un ordre de signification, comme le langage” (110) and hence should be examined and opposed through the medium of language from which it draws its strength.

Coincidently, Nathalie Sarraute has claimed, “mes véritables personnages, mes seuls personnages, ce sont les mots. Mais investis, mais pleins. Ce ne sont pas les mots pour les mots” (qtd. in Finas 4).

87 “[…] [la] substance culturelle est ‘consommée’ dans la mesure où son contenu n’alimente pas une pratique autonome, mais une rhétorique de la mobilité sociale, une demande qui vise un autre objet que la culture, ou plutôt ne vise celle-ci que comme élément codé de statu social. Il y a donc renversement, et le contenu proprement culturel n’apparaît plus ici que comme connotation, comme fonction secondaire.” (Baudrillard 162).
2.1.1 C’est beau

As previously mentioned, the seemingly harmless expression “C’est beau” is the crux of the conflict in the play. All the action begins with a deregulation of what could have been an agreeable discussion of something admired. In other words, what is pronounced beautiful by the father is not eagerly supported by the mother due to a discomfort caused by the presence of their son:

LUI : C’est beau, tu ne trouves pas ?
ELLE, hésitante : Oui…
LUI : Tu ne trouves pas que c’est beau ?
ELLE, comme à contrecœur : Si… si… (C’est 1453)

As these words are pronounced, one wonders what it is that has really been said. Firstly, the reader notes that the father finds something beautiful and while this something is unknown, one could presume perhaps (and this is later supported, to a certain degree, by the text) it concerns an artistic work. Through this statement, the father gives value to the object either on a purely aesthetic or intellectual level, as the ambiguity of the expression “C’est beau” indicates. A few other observations can be made, however, such as the lack of apparent context for this admired object, which renders it vulnerable to any interpretation, and hence suggests that the utterance “C’est beau” tends towards a superficial appreciation of external qualities, indicating a preference of taste rather than an informed judgment.

In fact, this idea of taste becomes further developed as the play progresses. Once reproached by the father’s authoritative point of view, instead of continuing to use the adjective ‘feignant’ which he labels as “laid” (C’est 1458), the mother switches to its other form which she accentuates: “Fai-né-ant est beau.” (1458). This example is highly ironic as the difference between the two is very minute and yet in accordance with ‘tastefulness’; the father elevates one as a standard of beauty and rejects the other as vulgar. Interestingly enough, the form that he prefers, ‘fainéant’, sounds like ‘fait néant’, calling to mind nothingness and emptiness and making an interesting parallel between the ‘thing’ admired by the father and the particular word. Perhaps, the item that he considers so beautiful is just as empty as the evocation produced by the questionably more tasteful term ‘fainéant’.

But let’s return to the expression “C’est beau”. In discussing the idea of beauty in contemporary art, Patrice Maniglier, professor of 20th-century French philosophy at Essex
University, explains that it is important to note a progress in contemporary art, a change in mentality where art has become a subject of thought rather than an object. He further suggests that since Duchamp and particularly during the 1960s conceptual art wave, intellect has largely replaced beauty in art, to the extent that one had to learn to perceive the act of thinking as enjoyable and not the aesthetic qualities of the work of art (*Les Nouveaux chemins*). Alain Fleischer, an artist and a writer, brings up another crucial aspect of contemporary art, that of “un mouvement de conquête esthétique de ce qui n’était pas reconnu, pas validé comme […] art avant” (*Les Nouveaux chemins*). In his opinion, this progressive movement is a transition between two different categories of art and vicariously of beauty, “le semblable et le différent”. Thus, the earlier admired models which perpetuate academic tastes pertain to the “similar” beauty, while the new forms that often incorporate banal or everyday objects constitute the “different” beauty. Both Maniglier and Fleischer also comment on the problem of understanding that is constantly evoked in regards to contemporary art. This problem is often aggravated by either speechless or name-dropping snobs who pretend to understand (or not to understand) a particular piece, while in reality simply trying to look fashionable. Moreover, Maniglier denounces “le snobisme d’immédiateté” (*Les Nouveaux chemins*) associated with the inheritance of taste which instructs that “il suffi[t] de se mettre face à une œuvre pour en ressentir immédiatement tous les effets” (*Les Nouveaux chemins*). This often contested point of view that appreciation of art is not immediate and requires rumination and learning can perhaps be seen as essential in trying to deconstruct the conflict sparked by the expression “C’est beau” which gives value, aside from the object itself, to what Raylene Ramsay calls “a readymade language” (799), to a statement that has become vacuous through its use as a simple filler, as a dust cloud that conceals the lack of real aesthetic sentiment and understanding.

While still on the topic of art, it is worth noting Sarraute’s aesthetic position glimpsed through her writing. According to Jean Pierrot, in reference to art, form and time Sarraute “[lutte]”

---

88 “[…] il y a une dimension de beauté dans la pensée elle-même […]” (*Les Nouveaux chemins*).

89 Roland Barthes describes these snobs in his article “Critique muette et aveugle” in *Mythologies*. But while he describes them as being sub-divided into two different types, they are really just two sides of the same Verdurin coin: “Les critiques […] usent souvent de deux arguments assez singuliers. Le premier consiste à décréter brusquement l’objet de la critique ineffable et par conséquent la critique inutile. L’autre argument […] consiste à s’avouer trop bête, trop bêotien pour comprendre un ouvrage réputé philosophique […] [C’est] une feinte panique d’imbécilité (dont le but [est] évidemment de discréditer […]).” (34).

90 In an interview published in *Art press* in April of 1996, a rather atypical artist, Alain Séchas speaks out against the elitism of what has become, in his opinion, a ready-mades epidemic. He proclaims that “l’art n’est ni une affaire de spécialistes, ni une affaire de professeurs. Si c’est beau, c’est beau pour tout le monde. Art ou pas” (Francblin 34).
vigoureusement contre un adversaire principal qui est constitué par l’idéal traditionnel […] [, contre l’] obéissance à un modèle fixe qui est celui que fournit la conception classique et platonicienne du Beau […] [ ,] protégé[e] par l’institution muséale” (423-424). Consequently, she is against the concept of ‘similar’ beauty and hence against “cette sacralisation de l’art, un art du même coup coupé de la vie et du temps” (427). This point of view is in many ways representative of the atmosphere of 1968, simultaneously evoking the advent of performance art and resonating as an echo of various art tendencies since Dada:

[…] substitution à l’objet, désormais en crise, de formes fugitives, comme le happening; refus des matières trop recherchées et célébration d’un art revenant à la pauvreté, à travers le choix de matériau quotidien, […] périssables; réintroduction dans la création du hasard et de l’aléatoire. (Pierrot 438)

As a result, one can see that Sarraute “dénoncé[e] la prétendue autorité, le jugement sans appel des experts, et l’absurde révérence qui leur est accordée habituellement” (445) as well as the consequential social degradation of art (456). These observations serve as an undercurrent for the play and its pivotal expression and guide us towards the deconstruction of what is authoritative, stagnant and cliché.

Before proceeding to further analysis, however, it is important to clarify the essence of the conflict provoked by the expression “C’est beau” as there are different points of view on this account. In his review of C’est beau, Benjamin Suhl reduces the play to a social satire based on a confrontation between two very different aesthetic points of view (181), while Guy Dumur sees it as a mere “conflit de générations” (68). These readings are quite superficial, as this play is neither really about an aesthetic conflict nor about a generational one. Rather, as Simone Benmussa rightly remarks, it stages the problematic of language; “c’est l’espace de la parole [qui est] atteint. Les mots. L’échange verbal. Une interrogation sur le corps de la parole.” (“Les mots inter-dits” 26). In other words, the conflict is produced not out of a dissonance in tastes but because of depersonalized and empty expressions.

91 For Sarraute, “[…] la création artistique se définit moins comme la réalisation patiente d’un objet durable et auquel on veut assurer la durée, qu’en termes d’activité et comme une gestuelle, une fête dont les traces s’effacent aussitôt qu’elle est achevée. Une activité de sens ambigu, non contraignante mais essentiellement ludique, laissant le maximum de place à la spontanéité et à l’improvisation qui, avec les gestes ou la voix, développera dans l’espace une forme non pas continue, mais intermittente, ouverte, flottante, en prise directe avec le jaillissement du vécu.” (Pierrot 436-437). In fact, one could say that this conception of art also informs Sarraute’s image of both individual and language.

92 “Le conflit des générations, c’est juste la coquille, ce serait simplement d’aimer autre chose que ce que les parents aiment, ni plus ni moins, ou de recouvrir d’un ‘c’est chouette’ d’autres objets de jouissance que les leurs recouverts par ‘c’est beau’. Il s’agit de quelque chose de plus profond, de plus essentiel.” (“Les mots inter-dits” 26).
While what is said by “C’est beau” is ambiguously meaningful, what is not said is much more important and deserves particular attention. In his article, “La nomination multiple: un compromis à la non-coïncidence des mots et de la sensation”, Stéphane Bikialo cites Nathalie Sarraute’s reflections on the difficulty of expressing feelings in words: “Tantôt le mot l’emporte, le plaisir de travailler le mot en lui-même fait qu’on oublie la sensation qui lui a donné naissance et on arrive à du beau langage, à l’harmonie, à la beauté vide […].” (85). Thus, the father’s utterance of “C’est beau” fails to convey a particular sentiment and simply becomes an expression of empty beauty, where “[i]t’s beautiful’ is a sterile formula, clapped on an aesthetic experience like a bottle cap” (Besser 133). Moreover, one cannot know whether the father even means what he says; such a possibility attests to the dual fallacy of what is said and renders words even more suspect. What this gap between language and sensation reveals is the general untrustworthiness of words; language is a trompe-l’oeil that should not be taken at face value:

Les paroles possèdent les qualités nécessaires pour capter, protéger et porter au-dehors [les] mouvements souterrains […]. Elles ont pour elles leur souplesse, leur liberté, la richesse chatoyante de leurs nuances, leur transparence ou leur opacité. […] Leur réputation de gratuité, de légèreté, d’inconséquence – ne sont-elles pas l’instrument par excellence des passetemps frivoles et des jeux – les protègent des soupçons et des examens minutieux […]; elles sont soumises à une réglementation assez lâche; elles entraînent rarement de graves sanctions. (L’Ère 1597)

Aside from not questioning enough what is really said, the main problem is the naïve belief that different people can communicate with the same words. Jérôme Prieur notes that the many conflicts elaborated in Sarrautean plays arise because of the consistent reliance on “cette langue quotidienne qui n’est la même pour personne” (181). It is undoubtedly from this failure that stems the lack of understanding and connection between different individuals.

Clichés invade daily life because we hope to achieve quick communication. But instead what is achieved can be summarized as ineffective and vacuous exchanges. As Alain Goulet remarks, “on communique de moins en moins […], on est envahi par de la parole vide, ou creuse, les automatismes du langage et des comportements” (184). Such verbal inadequacy evolves into real distanciation between people who no longer find common ground. This tendency can be seen in the play through the designations Lui, Elle and Le Fils which indicate that there is a clear separation between the family members, as if they do not even know each

---

93 This aspect of the non-dit in Sarraute’s writing has been often pointed out; among many, Michael de Cock notes that since “[la] parole […] n’est jamais innocente [, cet] intérêt pour ce qui se cache sous la surface de la parole est essentiel dans l’œuvre de Sarraute” (88).
other; they are not referred to as Le Père, La Mère and Le Fils but rather by means of pronouns; their relationship only identified through a single connective link – the son. A more evidently communicative void can be traced towards the end of the play when the son informs his father that his friend M. Bertrand has called. But it appears that the information provided by the son to M. Bertrand is not what the father had intended and thus, even the most banal exchange of information becomes affected by miscommunication.

Another aspect that is concealed by what is said, which has been touched upon indirectly in the discussion of taste, takes on a more menacing form and has greater social repercussions. It is the objectification and consumption of culture as a mark of prestige. Saying something is beautiful, certainly attributes value to that object but more importantly, as Huguette Bouchardeau in her biography of Nathalie Sarraute states, “dire ‘c’est beau’ parle de vous autant que de l’objet sur lequel vous venez de vous prononcer” (191). Thus, in voicing an appreciation of a certain work of art, one instantaneously associates himself with a given social group, a particular circle since “une culture, une appartenance à une classe sociale, se définissent d’abord par l’adhésion à un ensemble de valeurs connotées, hiérarchisées, datées” (191). 94 Ironically, however, this instant belonging to a certain cultured milieu may simply be concealing complete ignorance in regards to the object that is praised. 95 This point of view is succinctly summarized by John Miller who in discussing modern society remarks that “[t]aste is the sensibility that compensates for not knowing how things are made or how they work” (Miller 35). What serves as an extra clin d’œil to this consumption of language and objects is the fact that the object of admiration is unclear. While causing the reader to believe that the object in question is a work of art, later in fact designated as a gravure, it could just as well be one of the less valuable commercial “gravures

94 Issues of cultural prestige have been addressed by Sarraute as early as in her first work Tropismes. Text XI of Tropismes, for example, portrays a woman who has understood the secret of status: “Elle connaissait ‘l’échelle des valeurs’” (Tropismes 16); “[t]oujours ’l’intellectualité’. Il la lui fallait. Pour elle. Pour elle, car elle savait maintenant le véritable prix des choses” (17): “’C’est si beau’, disait-elle, en ouvrant d’un air pur et inspiré ses yeux où elle allumait une ‘étincelle de divinité’.” (17).

95 In her study of Les Fruits d’or, Sarraute’s earlier novel that is in fact a discussion of a novel with the same title, Valerie Minogue notes a certain incongruency of this sort of appreciation: “Reactions to the book are based more on a self-assertive ‘snobisme’ than on any intrinsic qualities it may have: the language is often that of people discussing membership of a fashionable club.” (War 118). It thus appears that many simply use art “to decorate socially presentable images of themselves” (138).
de mode” (Le Planétarium 411) which appear in the earlier novel. Consequently, the question of
tastefulness proves problematic, causing social poverty through kitschification of language:

À la limite, ce qui advient aux individus par cette ‘culture’ – qui exclut aussi bien
l’autodidacte, héros marginal de la culture traditionnelle, que l’homme cultivé, fleuron
humanistique embaumé et en voie de disparition – c’est du ‘recyclage culturel’, un
recyclage esthétique qui est un des éléments de la ‘personnalisation’ généralisée de
l’individu, du faire-valoir culturel en société concurrentielle, et qui équivaut, toutes
proportions gardées, au faire-valoir de l’objet par le conditionnement. (Baudrillard 163)

This conditioning can be seen in the vacuous language that is constantly circulated, avoiding
individualization, and which fails to produce meaningful and authentic relationships. Emblematic
of this is the father’s realization, towards the end of the play, of his inability to be himself in the
presence of his son: “Pas tant qu’il est là… ça n’entre pas… je n’entends plus, je ne sens rien…
tout se recouvre… une encre noire… Vite, au secours… mais aide-moi…” (C’est 1469). What
the father does not realize, however, is that his worst enemy is not the presence of his son but
rather the surrounding social conformism. It is with this notion in mind, that Sarraute has
described the consciousness of the modern man as nothing but “une trame légère ‘d’opinions
convenues, reçues telles quelles du groupe auquel il appartient’, et ces clichés eux-mêmes
recouvr[ent] ‘un néant profond’, une quasi totale ‘absence de soi-même’” (L’Ère 1558).

2.1.2 Social discourse of conformism

In C’est beau, the loss of singular, personalized expression is vividly demonstrated through the
reflexive and restrictive expression of the father, the mother and a number of abstract as well as
concrete voices. But it is the figure of the father who is represented most boldly as a passive
consumer and a reinforce of social conformism; so it is logical to start our analysis with him.

While passive consumption is unconscious and will be examined in great detail later, the
father’s authoritative role, responsible for the reinforcement of the conformist attitude, is
consciously integrated into every aspect of his behavior. 97 From the very beginning, the father
completely refuses any other points of view but his own: “Non […] je ne comprends pas…”

96 According to Baudrillard, “[l]e kitsch, c’est l’équivalent du ‘cliché’ dans le discours” (165). Verbal kitsch is
therefore a “preudo-objet, […] comme simulation, copie, objet factice, stéréotype, comme pauvreté de signification
réelle” (165-166).

97 According to Celia Britton, as demonstrated in her article “The Function of the Commonplace in the Novels of
Nathalie Sarraute”, it is in fact the conformism itself that is the source of authority: “the commonplace […] makes
generalizations which can be neither proved nor disproved, and this accounts for its peculiarly assertive character”
(81).
Out of fear of losing his dominant position, he questions his son’s sanity as soon as the latter tries to oppose him. When the mother takes the side of the son, the father accuses her of craziness as well: “Tu deviens folle aussi.” (1454); he thus positions himself as the only sane being whose voice should be heard: “Je suis normal, c’est tout…” (1454).

Now that his control has been justified, he begins throwing around his meaningless labels. The son is referred to as “[e]spèce de petit vaurien” (C’est 1454), “[f]ermé. […] Obten. […] Borné. ‘Pratique.’ Ah ce n’est pas un ‘rêveur’. Pas un ‘esthète’: aucun danger… les comics… les policiers… les juke-boxes… les matchs… Joli produit. Bravo.” (1457). While the father believes that his son is limited in his world view, this rascal is in fact much more open-minded than he could ever imagine. The boy neither simplifies nor tries to encapsulate or imprison everything, unlike his father who seems to exude particular delight in delimiting his already limited expression: “Beau. Beau. Une beauté parfaite. Beau à mourir. Beau.” (1454). In this attempt to prove that he does not shy away from his favoured expression “C’est beau”, attacked by the son, the father makes an obvious effort to stress what he believes is important. His statement, flanked by beau from both sides, becomes a closed form, an unalterable label solidified by periods, like an advertising billboard secured by screws on either side.

Sheila Bell in her article “Digne de figurer dans un musée? Archimboldo et la peinture-écriture” explains that in the novel Vous les entendez?, which has some undeniable parallels with C’est beau, “[I]e respect de l’œuvre d’art auquel souscrivent le père et l’ami est surtout représenté par le musée” (115). In Vous les entendez?, the father believes that because a work of art is in a museum it is good. Thus, “[I]e musée incarne ce principe d’autorité dans le domaine esthétique. […] On [y] enferme l’objet précieux pour le protéger” (116). Coincidently, the father in C’est beau, as the figure of authority – like the institution of the museum – incarnates this mentality of enclosure in both his expression and action as is evident in his locking up of the son – a precious object turned into a prisoner – to be protected from the ‘harmful’ external influences of popular culture. Using the son’s reference to his mother with a mere pronoun as a pretext, the father exiles him to his room, thus reappropriating his previously weakened power: “Qui ‘elle’,

---

98 “Il devient fou?” (C’est 1453).

99 These accusations of craziness pass through the play as a leitmotif, constantly changing their designation. In her critical writing on theatre, Sarratue juxtaposes “les gens dits ‘normaux’ […] ceux de la surface, ceux qui vivent dans l’apparence” “aux sourciers, aux voyants, aux hypersensibles, aux déliants, aux déments […] [et aux] fous” (“Le Gant” 1711). The crazy, like the clowns, are the embodiment of the authentic person which Sarratue believes is inside everyone: “[…] je crois, que nous en soyons ou non conscients, nous […] sommes tous [fous] […]” (1711). Many, however, try so hard to mask this underlying foolishness that they lose their authenticity.
d’abord? De qui parles-tu? Allons, ouste, déguerpis, tu nous déranges. Tu as fait tes devoirs? Tu te rappelles que tu as ta composition?” (C’est 1454). With laughter, the father believes he has succeeded in establishing authority over his son: “Il a réintégré. C’est ce qu’on appelle remettre à sa place. Une place d’où il n’aurait jamais pu bouger, s’il n’avait eu affaire qu’à moi. Enfermé là à triple tour…” (1454). While the father thinks that he has rendered his son immobile and conformist, his son’s respectful obedience is deceptive: “Oui, papa. J’ai presque fini… Il ne me reste plus que la fin de la Restauration.” (1454). This response could be interpreted asironically insinuating two things. In the first place, the son could be alluding to the need of dethroning his father’s sovereign power, by referencing the restoration of absolute monarchy in France. In the second place, he could be affirming that the only duty, and not homework, he has left is the restoration of language. Ignoring his son’s subversive humour, however, the father’s myopic gaze is only capable of encompassing the very obvious and hence limited happenings. As a result, it is not surprising that the play finishes with the outraged father bringing it back to where it already was once before – to an impasse. When the son tries to defend himself, and vicariously his mother, from the father’s unreasonable accusations in relation to the call from M. Bertrand, the father refuses to negotiate with a school boy:

   LUI : Pour te défendre, ta mère dirait n’importe quoi…

   LE FILS : Non. Tu sais bien qu’elle ne ment jamais.

   LUI : Tu me donnes des leçons à présent! Et puis de qui parles-tu? Qui ‘elle’? (C’est 1470)

This cyclical aspect of the play simply attests once again to the father’s enclosing mentality that loops back on itself and resists any divagations. At the same time, the father’s comment on the fact that his wife would say anything to defend her son is rather insightful, as she does indeed change her expression in order to stay ‘connected’ with her son.

As part of her balancing role, the wife acts surprised at the way her husband uses the words, how “[il] os[e] le[s] brandir, le[s] lancer” (C’est 1455) as if they were objects turned into weapons. Unwilling to justify his actions, the father assures his wife that the whole problem is in the upbringing of the child and that he has been warning her against those “mots interdits […] des mots qu’on n’avait pas le droit d’employer” (1455) since their son was small, “encore vagissant, tout trempé, tout ridé” (1445). The father uses the accumulation of terms as if mocking
his son’s and wife’s new way of talking.\textsuperscript{100} The mother who is a bit more cautious of labels, insists that certain words should not be pronounced, expressing horror at some typical designations applied to children: “‘Mon petit.’ Ou pire encore: ‘Mon petit bonhomme.’ […] Ça me choquait. Il me semblait que c’était comme dire… Comme dire youpin. Comme dire bicot. Comme dire ‘les femmes’. Impossible. Pas question. Il fallait absolument une parfaite égalité…” (1455). While trying to avoid essentialization, she still ironically has to invoke the big concept of ‘equality’, as she certainly desires nothing but ‘happiness’ for her family.

As expected, the father strongly disagrees with her egalitarian point of view and insists that the son has always been in the privileged position: “Il nous était supérieur… Tout en virtualités exquises. En possibilités… il n’y avait que l’embarras du choix.”\textsuperscript{101} \textit{(C’est 1455)}. On this note, the father takes a step back and remarks that things could have been worse and that they should consider themselves happy: “Nous pouvons dire que nous l’avons échappé belle… On a eu de la chance. Du pot… comme il dirait…” (1456). He uses clichés and slang to sound more contemporary and employs multiple denominations once again to mock his son through imitation. Interestingly enough, the mother does not remain faithful to the deconstructive tendency of expression that she adapted from her son earlier in the play\textsuperscript{102}, but rather she reverts back to simplified language and copies her husband: “Oh oui! C’est vrai. Beaucoup de chance.” (1456). This dynamic shows that, in the end, the father and the mother are nothing but different sides of the same coin (like the black and red parts of one of Calder’s pieces in \textit{Petit panneau bleu}). Nonetheless, there is constant movement in the dynamic relationship between the three family members (yet again as in Calder’s mobile \textit{objet-spectacle}), symbolizing the constant failures of communication; at times, the mother is in alliance with her son and thus sees her husband as crazy (1456); at others, without realizing it, she is in complete alliance with him and vicariously with social norms. Blindly, the mother innocently reflects on how when the child is an infant any poor choices on the part of the parents can become “les fautes… criminelles” (1456) later on in his life, failing to see that social conformism offers a much greater danger to the upbringing of their son and that perhaps she does not need to search for answers in the distant

\textsuperscript{100} To be discussed in part 2 - Thick description.

\textsuperscript{101} In these lines, one can glimpse an allusion to the paradigmatic writing, to be explored later, full of possibilities and variants.

\textsuperscript{102} This is a reference to the paradigmatic expression to be addressed in chapter 2 and that can be seen in the following example where the mother uses a reformulation to communicate her feelings: “Pas simple \textsuperscript{(1)}- Pas juste une pensée qui vous traverse rapidement \textsuperscript{(2)}…” \textit{(C’est 1457)}. 
past. The father, however, is satisfied with the idea that all the flaws of his son are due to some misconduct on his wife’s part and so he pressures her to absolve her sins and to tell him, with great precision, what she might have done wrong: “À quel moment? Dans quel mois?” (1457). This insistence is completely absurd, but it fits perfectly with the image of the father as someone who is confident and controlling and who resents anything complicated. He becomes the embodiment of ‘common sense’, guided not only by sound judgment but also by shared and conventional attitudes.

The father feels that when it comes to his son, “[i]l n’y a qu’un seul moyen” (C’est 1457), implicitly indicating that kicking him out of the house is the sole solution to the conflict. As if in a moment of passion, the father blurts out: “Qu’il aille au bout du monde. Qu’on le mette en prison… dans une maison de redressement. Qu’il disparaisse… À tous les diables.” (1457-1458). This unexpected verbal violence, where a mere wish for isolation grows into a desire for incarceration of one’s own son, culminates in a cruel invocation of death and damnation. Pronounced in a tone of suppressed excitement, as is indicated by the absence of exclamation marks, this invocation turns into a prophecy of a fascist regime capable of reducing even a family member to total silence and oblivion. Moreover, the father’s multi-layered expression becomes as usual stifled by lifeless clichés that frame his train of thought like two prison walls. He constantly has recourse to ready-made expressions to describe his intentions and thoughts, not taking the time to reflect on and re-word what goes on inside him. In other words, what he says is not personal but rather communal and hence as a speaker, he is “generalizing and generalized” (Britton 83); one might even say that both he and his expression are inhuman.

This impulsive and stereotypical manner of expression is explained by Sarraute as a reflexive response to different stimuli:

Les dictons, les citations, les métaphores, les expressions toutes faites ou pompeuses ou pédantes, les platitudes, les vulgarités, les maniérismes, les coq-à-l’âne qui parsèment habilement ces dialogues […] sont […] la résultante de mouvements montés des profondeurs, nombreux, emmêlés, que celui qui les perçoit au-dehors embrasse en un éclair et qu’il n’a ni le temps ni le moyen de séparer et de nommer. (L’Ère 1606)

103 These qualities are exemplified by the lexical field attributed to the father. He often rejects any forms of exaggeration (“Oh n’exagérons rien.” (C’est 1454), “il ne faut rien exagérer” (1457)), he is constantly certain (“C’est sûrement tout de même moins grave…” (1457), “Ça non. Ça je ne le crois pas.” (1457)) and authoritative (expressing himself in “ton ferme” (1457)) and simplifying everything (“Oh, une simple pensée…” (1457)).

104 In the preface to the Dictionnaire des expressions et locution, Alain Rey reflects on the populist nature of set expressions: “[...] les locutions mettent en œuvre des associations mentales où s’expriment le symbolisme et l’inconscient culturels” (Rey XIX).
These automatically chosen preset expressions that inundate the text and can be interchangeably attributed to either the father, the mother or the other voices\textsuperscript{105}, that appear later in the play, are dangerous in that they erode individuality\textsuperscript{106} and finally impede communication.\textsuperscript{107} So if a commonplace is “neither a communication between people nor the expression of an individual” (Britton 85), then it has simply become what Baudrillard referred to as cultural recycling:

And if all meaning is lost, then why not rebel and destandardize the language? Such a rebellion would not be easy as stereotypes have ubiquitous power. So, opposing the stereotype would be equivalent to opposing the father. Coincidentally, this parallel is drawn in Alain Goulet’s analysis of Ionesco’s \textit{La Leçon}: “Le combat contre l’emprise des stéréotypes, contre le petit bourgeois, c’est le combat contre toutes les figures du Père, un père honni et dangereux: le professeur, le policier, le chef de bureau ou de parti, le nazisme et le stalinisme avec les ravages de leur langue de bois.” (185). He further emphasizes that “[l]e stéréotype reste exemplairement une parole aliénée et aliénante, la parole de l’autre, la doxa, qui s’oppose au langage vrai qui serait celui de mon être propre” (185). To resist commonplaces, one has to overthrow the figure of the father – the dominating tyrant – the overarching metaphor for the power of clichés in consumer society; this is an assassination that would be possible if it weren’t for the fact that he is not alone.

It is not only the father and the mother who participate in this exchange of stereotypes. In fact, their entire environment chimes in as well. As a result, what is produced is an atmosphere of


\textsuperscript{106}In her essay “Stéréotypes, narrativité et attribution”, Gisèle Valency comments on the loss of authenticity caused by clichés: “Cette projection paradoxale du plus intime vers le lieu commun, manifeste la vanité d’une tentative d’expression de soi comme être unique.” (Valency 69).

\textsuperscript{107}According to Celia Britton, “[…] the commonplace becomes less a communication than an object in its own right; that is, it has ceased (on the denotative plane) to be a sign of anything beyond itself – the more so since it derives from a collective subject and has thus lost that transparency which comes from being an intention of subjective expression […].” (85).
mimicry and synchronization fueled by the platitudes. This need to imitate and be approved by the other can be described as “[la] tentation du mot juste comme recherche de la coïncidence avec autrui” (Bikialo 88). As seen earlier with the expression “C’est beau”, “the speaker uses the commonplace to ‘place’ himself as a recognizable type in a social context” (Britton 80). This tendency to simulate and resemble the other through clichés thus becomes necessary in order to appear cultivated:

[...] esthétique de la simulation est profondément liée à la fonction socialement assignée au kitsch de traduire l’aspiration, l’anticipation sociale de classe, l’affiliation magique à une culture, aux formes, aux mœurs et aux signes de la classe supérieure, une esthétique de l’acculturation [...]. (Baudrillard 168)

In the play, the simulatory aesthetic becomes apparent in what can be referred to as the doubling of the self and the off-stage voices that haunt the setting. Through them, the mother and the father, both seek unity and cohesion with the masses.

In hopes of creating a counter argument to the father’s accusations, the mother starts having a conversation with herself by changing voices, sometimes replying “[d’] une voix qui n’est pas la sienne” (C’est 1458), as if she is carrying on a dialogue with someone else, although not physically present:

Est-ce que c’est un assassin ? (Sa voix :) Oh non… Il ne ferait pas de mal à une mouche. (Voix étrangère :) C’est un voleur ? (Sa voix :) Oh non… L’honnêteté même… (Voix étrangère :) Un menteur ? (Sa voix :) Non. (Voix étrangère :) Un pervers ? (Sa voix :) Non, non. (Voix étrangère :) Un feignant ?... (C’est 1458)

While she thinks she is opposing her husband’s authority and poor choice of words, “avec défi” (1458), by representing arguments in a mise-en-scène of her own, at times demanding silence like a director would (1458) and at others, vying for attention from her imaginary viewers108, she simply refutes the negative labels, replacing them with positive pre-set expressions that are essentially of the same caliber. Gradually, the inner division into two voices seems to take on a surreal presence as a separate, disincarnated voice or voices (it is not clear whether there is a single voice or many anonymous ones) materialize on the page as an entity designated by VOIX just like ELLE, LUI and LE FILS. These seemingly independent voices could in fact be what Sarraute referred to, in “Le Gant retourné”, as a theatrical inversion of what happens in her

108 “Vous voyez, messieurs dames, tout est là.” (C’est 1458).
novels – the inside becomes the outside (“Le Gant” 1708). In other words, the external voices could actually be the pre-dialogical interior voices of the mother continuously struggling to negotiate her son’s identity. However, by presenting these voices as external to her, supposedly unbiased and disinterested, the mother hopes that they will be more convincing than her own voice:

VOIX : Si ce n’est pas malheureux. Pas dévergondé. Pas voleur. Pas menteur. Pas malhonnête. Pas drogué. Pas feignant. Ah il y en a à votre place qui seraient contents. Il y en a qui seraient fiers. Il y en a qui seraient rudement heureux. Il y en a qui n’en espéraient pas tant… Pensez donc, par les temps qui courent… avec la jeunesse, qu’on voit en ce moment… avec tous ces propre-à-rien… (C’est 1459)

This technique, possibly inspired by the non-visual, radio origin of the play, was designated by Arnaud Rykner as “voix off” (Œuvres 2016), since the voices do not have real stage presence. Interestingly enough, off-stage voices are most commonly used by TV advertising in an attempt to make the displayed product more appealing to all of the viewers’ senses. Is it possible then that the physical absence of the speaker endows the voice with some Godly quality? This certainly seems to be the case in C’est beau where the disembodied voices, as if in an advertising commercial, soon become the authority in the conversation. Instead of being sincere and individualized, however, these voices remain superficial and generic; they resound like a voice of social conformism that demands adhesion to its standards and over-used expressions: “Faites attention que le Ciel ne vous punisse pas. S’il arrivait, qu’à Dieu ne plaise, touchons du bois… […] Vous ne connaissez pas votre bonheur… […] Avouez-le. Un beau garçon comme ça. […] Grand. Bien proportionné. Costaud.” (C’est 1460). When the father contrasts his own upbringing with that of his son, opposing books and museums to his son’s more ‘primitive’ forms of education – comic books and television (1461), an external voice simply insists on assimilating everything to a general standard: “Ah que voulez-vous, il est de son temps… c’est normal, il est comme tout le monde…” (1461). In an uncanny manner, the mother repeats the words of the voice, inciting her husband to follow the lead, as if they were both hypnotized: “Tout le monde le fait. Tout le monde le dit… Tous les jeunes sont ainsi… Nous sommes comme tout le monde…” (1461). This chanting of a slogan-like set of words is demonstrative of the powerful unconscious effect that such commonplaces have on individuals, invading them completely.

109 These voices, in their choral form, could also allude to mass culture, lacking individual identity and yet making a ruckus with their homogenous incantations.
Despite the obvious, the mother thinks she is completely in tune with her son’s sensibility and hence has the right to reproach the father: “[...] ne recommence pas... pas ces mots... si convenus... sclérosants... emphatiques... tu vois, mon chéri, je crois que je comprends...” (C’est 1468). She desperately tries to distinguish herself from the father by qualifying his earlier retort “Qui ‘elle’ [...]?” (1454) – in reference to his son’s ‘tasteless’ use of the pronoun – as a ridiculous, simple reflex produced “par habitude. Par conformisme” (1466). However, she fails yet again to see that most of her own utterances follow the same pattern. In fact, any attempt to get out of this reductive reasoning is countered by the VOIX which states that “des exceptions... [e]lles confirment [aussi]” (1461). While the doubling of the mother and the proliferation of voices was meant to reveal the truth, their actual impact is solely that of reinforcing the commonplaces and overall simplifying conformism of both parents. The father congratulates himself on his treatment of the son: “[...] je l’ai forcé à réintégrer... Je l’ai enfermé.” (1466). In his expression, the ellipsis seems to indicate the desire to say ‘réintégrer la société’, make him like them, force him to conform. Moreover, towards the end of the play, the father is ecstatic, still believing that to resolve the conflict with his son “[i]l peut suffire d’un mot!” (1468) and the mother is overjoyed upon concluding that she and her son “se ressemble[nt] tellement” (1468). Their behavior attests to a constant need to be understood and accepted by others even though these connections are completely illusory.

Such desperate attempts do not stop here, as the father insists on asking others (in the form of the off-stage voices) for help in order to establish and reassert his own point of view. Having had enough of his wife’s games (C’est 1461), he demands to be heard with his own supporting crowd, bringing in examples of some other families named Duranton, Herbart and Charrat (1462). VOIX DES DURANTON, for example, support the father’s insistence on resorting to desperate measures: “Dans les cas désespérés, que ne fait-on pas? Nous-mêmes si, par malheur, une chose pareille nous était arrivée avec Jacques, avec Pierre... Eux, Dieu merci, jusqu’à présent toujours fourrés... dès qu’ils ont un moment libre...” (1464). In fact, it is a common technique in Sarraute’s writing for certain characters to have recourse to asking for help from “des gens parfaitement sains, normaux” (1463) who are external to the conflict and are supposed to resolve it but who in the end never do.110 These ‘normal’ others serve as a symbolic representation of social conformism, in the same way as do the constant attempts of both the

110 Similar situations can be noted in Tu ne t’aimes pas and Pour un oui ou pour un non.
father (1463) and the mother (1464) to imitate the voices and the words of others. Curiously enough, in this ceaseless tug of war for power, neither one ends up victorious. And even when the father takes control, telling the mother to now follow his lead in prescriptive language and thinking, the only thing achieved is not hierarchy but a unity solidified in platitudes:


ELLE : ‘C’est beau’ sont des mots que nous n’osons pas prononcer en présence de notre propre enfant. Et maintenant tu vas voir…

LUI : Non, pas ça… ‘Et maintenant tu vas voir’, c’était adressé à toi. (C’est 1462)

This absurd excerpt is like a parody of the conversation between the teacher and the student in Ionesco’s La Leçon, reminding the reader that such an exchange can only culminate tragically. But unlike in La Leçon, where one voice eventually triumphs over the other, these lines are further repeated by both of them in a vocal unison, their voices becoming indistinguishable from one another as if a fusion has taken place. The two have become one and in that they are many.

2.2 Thick Description

Tired of the invasive monotony and the meaninglessness of the oversimplified, overused language, Sarraute desires to restore and reconstruct it. Her goal is very specific, “débarrasser ce qu’[elle] observe de toute la gangue d’idées préconçues et d’images toutes faites qui l’enveloppent, de toute cette réalité de surface que tout le monde perçoit sans effort” (qtd. in Goulet 186). In relation to this brave undertaking, Emer O’Beirne, in his article “The Self and Language: Authenticity and Convention”, rightly remarks that “[t]he fact that Sarraute persists in writing for a reader despite the gloomy view of communication her writing depicts, is related to her belief that the writer can forge an exceptional language” (105). In order to oppose the insufficiency of the immediate, non-individualized, dead and ultimately reified language, Sarraute attempts to render what is said less clear and more extensive – in other words,

111 After a while, the anonymous VOIX that first appeared in interactions with the wife and the voices that are more determined such as the VOIX DE MME DURANTON become all enmeshed in VOIX DIVERSES (C’est 1463). Individually, the different voices all fulfill the same role, that of reinforcement of social conformism either internally (that is perhaps if the VOIX addressed by the wife is actually part of her) or externally (voice of Duranton etc.). However, when they overlap, plurivocality that is produced, despite its still narrow-minded perspective in terms of the context, as they still speak out against son’s ‘philistine’ manners, becomes the epitome of paradigmatic writing: “on sent une fermeture insultante (1)… un ignoble mépris (2)… une menace sournoise (3)… que ces gens-là font peser sur tout ce qui compte, ils avilissent (1), ils aplatissent (2) tout… […] On a honte devant eux de profaner (1)… on a envie de soustraire à leur contact (2)… de mettre à l’abri (3)… il ne faut surtout pas les provoquer… qu’ils approchent pas…” (1463-1464).
thicker.\textsuperscript{112} And while Bettina Knapp in her review of \textit{C’est beau} suggests that “Sarraute offers no answers to the chasm existing within families and within the social, aesthetic, political, or psychological structure” (204), I believe that Sarraute, on the contrary, offers a feasible solution.

2.2.1 Abstraction and extension

Abstraction in Sarrautean writing does not begin with the language, it permeates the entire atmosphere of her work and when it comes to her plays, it is all the more the case. Initially, like most of her dramatic works, \textit{C’est beau} was created for radio and had its debut in 1972 (\textit{Œuvres} 2018) prior to being subsequently published in 1975. This immaterial nature, integral to the nascence of her plays, should be seen as an important aspect of Sarraute’s theatrical productions that inevitably contributed to the privileging of language. And as Arnaud Rykner in his \textit{Notice} to the play rightly adds, “à la radio on ne voit rien; […] [alors Sarraute] parvient à imposer au théâtre l’indétermination […] [qui est d’ailleurs accentuée par le] caractère fantasmatique – voire fantômatique – […] des voix désincarnées – voix \textit{off}” (2016). This indetermination is further accentuated by the non-specification of the object discussed. From the beginning of the play, until just a few pages before the end\textsuperscript{113}, it is up to the reader to imagine what it is that the father and the mother admire and which the son refuses to accept as beautiful. Even when articulated, however, the term \textit{gravure} reveals little to create a clear picture of the situation. Since this engraving or print could have any kind of subject matter, could be original or a copy, an individual work of art or an illustration in a book, it is impossible to extract meaning from such a multiplicity of choices. Besides the general absence of the object admired, the son is another figure who is hidden most of the time. Even though he is present at the inception of the conflict, the majority of the interaction takes place in his absence; aside from his brief intervention at the beginning, which is interrupted by his father’s decision to send him back to his room, and another brief reappearance at the end of the play, the son remains out of sight, abstracted like a figment of imagination. He is clearly a minority in the familial and social realms and his words are marginalized; by minimizing the son’s presence and confining the communication to the father, the mother and their surreal voices, Sarraute succeeds in re-evaluating both language and time.

\textsuperscript{112} The idea of “thick description”, which will be explored and adapted later, is an anthropological procedure that seeks to interpret various social practices and discourses through close analysis and elucidation of context.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{ELLE} : “[…] ce que ton père me montrait tout à l’heure, cette gravure […].” (\textit{C’est} 1468).
Time and silence are two other important factors in the enterprise of abstraction and extension that Sarraute undertakes. In the cultural sphere, Baudrillard has been observant enough to remark that “[l']emprise de milieu urbain et industriel fait apparaître de nouvelles raretés: l’espace et le temps, l’air pur, la verdure, l’eau, le silence” (72-73). In her turn, Sarraute notes these deficits in her writing\(^{114}\) and in taking the time to write about some insignificant, short-term conflicts and expanding their duration and amplitude\(^{115}\), she skillfully attempts to remedy their elitist and finite state. In C’est beau, the father, who embodies the social masses deprived of time, is described as “[t]rès exigeant. Toujours si impatient” (C’est 1459) and thus serves as the prototype to be avoided, reconstructed. Hence the harmful lack of time that produces nothing but platitudes is consistently problematized in Sarraute’s plays and substituted with breaks that permit longer reflection. Such breaks are indicated in different manners. Sometimes “Un temps” (1458) is used to mark the time for the parents to reflect after their son has left the room. In another case, when the mother continues to pressure the son to say whether he thinks the object of their admiration is beautiful, the son resorts to “Silence” (1467). This imposed silence forces the parents to question their son’s intention and gives them (as well as readers, listeners and spectators) more time to reconsider their language.\(^{116}\) The silence introduced by the stage directions is soon integrated into the actual communication. After the son’s second entrance, the father speaks less and less while the mother talks the most; her words, however, are perforated by excessive ellipsis, as if silence has penetrated to the core of her capacity to express herself and she fails to finish her thoughts for fear of doing what her son rejects:

```
Eh bien, tu sais, j’en avais parlé l’autre jour… quelque chose de… non, ne t’inquiète pas, je fais attention… quelque chose à ne pas manquer, tu me permets de dire ça… un choc pour moi… un événement… cette exposition… Mais tu l’as peut-être vue ? …. Non, bon, ce n’est pas ça […]… (C’est 1468)
```

This recourse to silence and the extension of the temporal plane put more emphasis on what is said as well as what is not said, bringing those elements to the surface to be further examined.

Viviane Forrester has also noted that through these tropes, Nathalie Sarraute “invente le temps de

\(^{114}\) Sarraute is completely aware that “[l]a conversation, c’est exactement tout ce qu’il y a de plus banal… parce qu’en effet on n’a pas beaucoup de temps, on n’a pas beaucoup d’instruments à sa disposition, et parce que les clichés se présentent à l’esprit d’une façon automatique… Alors, on saisit ce qu’on a sous la main…” (Wright 43).

\(^{115}\) Early on in her career, Sarraute already claimed that the creation of “un présent démesurément agrandi” (L’Ère 1554) was part of her innovative strategy.

\(^{116}\) As a side note, it is interesting to mention that in his stage production, which was done in collaboration with Sarraute, Claude Régy actually made this short play last around one hour and twenty minutes (Œuvres 2019), thus even further extending the already ‘enlarged’ time allotment.
l’écrivain, qui permet de suspendre la durée, de dilater l’instant, de le capter, le maintenir, l’explorer dans sa fugacité même et de happer la vie dans sa disparition” (132). In other words, Sarraute revives language in a timely fashion.

The extension of what is said is also achieved through the avoidance and questioning effectuated by the son. In her book, *Le Roman dialogué après 1950: poétique de l’hybridité*, Marie-Hélène Boblet comments on the significance of these techniques:

La transgression définitive, on l’a dit, est le refus de coopérer. Comme la structure fondamentale de tout dialogue, au moins implicitement, est le système question-réponse, la première subversion consiste à refuser de répondre. (*Le Roman dialogué* 112-113)

This non-cooperative behaviour used by the son to remedy the decrepit language of his parents is very fitting as he is described by his mother as an attentive and scrupulous person: “L’esprit très libre. Il ne s’en laisse jamais accroire… Pas d’arguments d’autorité avec lui. Il passe tout au crible.” (*C’est* 1464). Thus, when the mother finally calls her son “juste pour un instant” (1465) to ask him something in regards to the earlier argument, he interrupts her questioning attempt with a reply on the topic of his homework: “Oui, j’ai fini. Il ne me reste plus qu’un résumé…” (1465). This answer at once closes the conversation both formally and symbolically. With an emphasis on the words ‘fini’ and ‘un’ a subtle critique of narrow mindedness of the previous conflict is produced and the fact that the son ingeniously changes the subject of the possible conversation initiated by his mother to his homework, shows that it is the only subject (a trivial one) that he and his parents can still discuss. He further proceeds to question naively everything the parents send his way: “Quel air?” (1465), “Que je recommence quoi?” (1466). Pretending not to understand in order to force his parents to explain, to expand and to elaborate on what they cannot express. When the evasion and questioning do not seem to be too fruitful, the son decides to give an honest answer to his parents’ imploration:

ELLE et LUI, *voix blanches*: Tu ne trouves pas ça beau? Tu détestes ça… tout ça…

LE FILS, *condescendant*: Mais non, voyons… il ne s’agit pas de ça…

EUX, *avec espoir*: Pas de ça… Oh mon chéri… de quoi alors ? […]

LE FILS, *hésitant*: Eh bien, c’est cette expression ‘C’est beau’… ça me démolit tout… il suffit qu’on plaque ça sur n’importe quoi et aussitôt… tout prend un air… (*C’est* 1467)

Having instilled enough silence, and perhaps hoping to create more, the son finally speaks out against these conventional banalities that become “une facilité. Un conformisme” (1467). Like
Sarraute, “[i]l a horreur. De la banalité plaquée, de la facilité cartonnée en conformisme, des chœurs parlés, des béni oui oui, des étiquettes, des emballages, de ce qui finit, définit, arrête” (Régy 83). After trying to give his parents an answer that would bring a pause to the commotion and the platitudes, the son realizes that his effort has failed and gives in, providing his father with a conventional answer but with a twist: “Oui. C’est assez chouette, je te l’accorde.” (C’est 1468). While some have interpreted this reply as the son’s blind conformism to the same labeling that he critiques, since ‘chouette’ is simply a more up-to-date term to describe something that is liked, it could also be seen as son’s consciously simplified response to his parents who obviously seek an easy answer they can understand. Even though simplified, however, saying that something is rather neat-looking emphatically stresses the formal and surface qualities of the work, visibly separating it from any intrinsic value it may or may not have (since something might look good but be absolutely meaningless and dull). “C’est beau” on the other hand, may refer to both internal (intellectual) and external (visual) properties of the work, thus creating a convenient ambiguity in meaning. In this manner, through his thoughtful choice of words, the son actually diminishes the object admired by his parents without their realizing it.

2.2.2 Accumulation and decentrement

Even though the son manages to outwit his parents with a single, simple expression, this is not the ingenious technique Sarraute uses to rehabilitate and to reinvent language. Baudrillard has mentioned that “[l]a richesse n’est pas fondée dans les biens, mais dans l’échange concret entre les personnes” (92) and these exchanges, in their turn, should be rich in themselves, thick and deep in order to communicate meaning. This is perhaps from where stems Sarraute’s “refus du mot unique, du UN du dire […] de ces mots-réflexes” (Bikialo 87). So, in order to reimbue the language with vitality, to strip it of its worn-out layers, Sarraute propounds an expression that is based on accumulation and decentrement. This type of communication is not only a reflection of the previously described attempt to extend the temporal plane of thought but also a way to achieve undecidability that will reconstruct meaning.118

---

117 This choice is further elaborated by Bikialo: “Non seulement en effet le nom, précisément parce qu’il est commun, partagé par tous conventionnellement […] étouffe la spécificité de l’état en question, mais son unicité même empêche de rendre compte de l’aspect vivant, dynamique.” (87).

The first step in articulating undecidability is the reappropriation of excess associated with consumer society. This strategy can be elucidated by Baudrillard’s critical understanding of the social and cultural state of the time:

L’amoncellement, la profusion est évidemment le trait descriptif le plus frappant. Les grands magasins, avec leur luxuriance de conserves, de vêtements, de biens alimentaires et de confection, sont comme le paysage primaire et le lieu géométrique de l’abondance. Mais toutes les rues, avec leurs vitrines encombrées, ruisselantes […], leurs étages de charcuterie, toute la fête alimentaire et vestimentaire qu’elles mettent en scène, toutes stimulent la salivation féérique. Il y a quelque chose de plus dans l’amoncellement que la somme des produits: l’évidence du surplus, la négation magique et définitive de la rareté […]. (Baudrillard 19)

In this society where “[l]a surinformation produit une apathie de masse” (Guérin 427) and where an endless array of choices makes it difficult to choose, it is a creative move to fight against surplus with surplus. 119 Sarraute does not shy away from using the tools of her time, namely the overabundance or “la profusion et la panoplie” (Baudrillard 19), in hopes of creating a communication reflective of the society. She is simultaneously attempting what Bikialo refers to as “dire en plus pour pallier le décalage constant entre les mots et les choses” (91) as well as to bridge the gap between words and feelings.

The most poignant example of this technique in the play is the first interjection of the son; it is the longest and the densest passage at the beginning of the play:

Oh écoute, pourquoi faire semblant ? Tu sais bien que tu n’obtiendras rien de plus que ça… que du bout des lèvres (1)… que d’une voix blanche (2)… rien de plus… Rien, tu sais bien… Puisque je suis là… Et je n’ai même pas besoin de me montrer (1), pas besoin de faire coucou le voilà (2)... Il suffit que je sois derrière le mur (1)... enfermé dans ma chambre (2)... même derrière un mur de béton (3) ma seule présence suffit pour que ça ne sorte pas […]. (C’est 1453)

As opposed to the short statements such as the infamous “C’est beau, tu ne trouves pas?” (1453) uttered by the father, this lengthy retort offers much to be examined. First of all, the most

119 In one of the subchapters of Malaise dans l’esthétique, Jacques Rancière addresses problems and transformations in the field of contemporary art. As part of this exploration, he discusses four major principles of contemporary exhibitions among which he names “le jeu […] et l’inventaire” (74). Both of these aspects are also present in Sarraute’s writing as she plays with the idea of profusion and accumulation. While the disciplines these elements pertain to are quite different, they could have similar repercussions as illuminated in Rancière’s ultimate statement on the current state of contemporary art. He explains that “[la] valeur de révélation polémique est devenue indécidable” (75) or in other words, critical art’s attempts (tentatives) at deligitimating the hegemonic discourses “passées du registre critique au registre ludique deviennent, à la limite, indiscernables de celles qui sont produites par le pouvoir et les médias, ou par les formes de présentation propres à la marchandise” (76). It is worth noting this trend as it could potentially be used by some to critique artists and writers like Sarraute, who have recourse to the strategy of undecidabilité, for not making their critical opinion more explicit.
obvious aspect is the accumulation of terms that all contribute to the creation of a denser, thicker description but which are not necessarily synonymous and, in fact, most of the time they are only metonymically related such as “derrière le mur” and “dans ma chambre”. This indirect method of inventorisation is effective in defamiliarizing the desired message and thus creating a unique expression. Secondly, the son ridicules the clichés used by the father such as “du bout des lèvres” and “d’une voix blanche”; in fact, by listing more than one of those platitudes, he demonstrates their insufficiency in communicating the real sentiment and implies the need for more personalized words. Thirdly, son’s repetition of the word ‘rien’ once again underlines the emptiness of preset expressions and their inability to transfer meaning. As a result, even though the son’s presence in the play is limited, his words resound throughout and transform the entire play with the legacy of thick ink: “[...] je vais, comme la pieuvre, sécréter… une encre noire va se répandre… Regarde papa, il est déjà tout recroquevillé…” (1467).

Now, it is possible to read C’est beau as a work of “thick description” in a dual sense. In the first sense, it is representative of what Clifford Geertz’s defined as “thick description”120 in his seminal work The Interpretation of Cultures. Geertz, a proponent of a semiotic concept of culture, believes that an ethnographic description, which is a thick description, is essential to the understanding of culture. According to Geertz, as a branch of anthropology that deals with scientific description of specific human culture, ethnography needs specific criteria for communicating information. Thus, he identifies four characteristics of ethnographic, thick description:

[...] it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms. [...] there is, in addition, a fourth characteristic of such description [...] it is microscopic. (Geertz 20-21)

In short, “thick description” explains the context of the practices and discourse within a society. While Sarraute does not show the social context explicitly, she stages it and, as if echoing the above characteristics, she effectively interprets and reveals what is really ‘said’ through the commonplaces of the social discourse in her microscopic studies.121 In C’est beau, the very

---

120 To give a quick example of “thick description” here is the distinction made by Gilbert Ryle, from whom the term was initially borrowed: “[...] the ‘thin description’ of what the hearer (parodist, winker, twitcher... ) is doing (‘rapidly contracting his right eyelids’) and the ‘thick description’ of what he is doing (‘practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion’).” (qtd. in Geertz 7).

121 Sarraute’s tendency towards the microscopic (“Le Gant” 1710), which she herself repeatedly proclaimed, has been noted by many. For instance, Rothenberg describes the subject matter of Sarrautean plays as “microdrama
essence of thick description can be attributed to the sole phrase “C’est beau”, whose intricate implications are thoroughly explored and through which an ethnographic reflection on the state of society can be glimpsed. In the second sense, this play employs what we could term as “thick description”, by reappropriating Geertz’s term, in its manner of reconstructing language through accumulation and collection. This style of writing, resembling “[l]e collage des notations, l’imbrication des remarques” (Amiel 26), is in no way a creation of C’est beau, as its fledgling bursts can already be observed as early as in Sarraute’s first work, Tropismes. But unlike her other works, in this play, the power of the style is accentuated as it is anchored in a conflict surrounding a particular expression and attributed to the figure who pushes for radical change, namely, the son. It is the latter sense of “thick description” that I wish to reformulate and develop further as it is emblematic in establishing the aesthetic of undecidability.

According to Jacques Rancière, for an artist working in the contemporary social climate, “[l]a seule subversion restante est alors de jouer sur cette indécidabilité, de suspendre, dans une société fonctionnant à la consommation accélérée des signes, le sens des protocoles de lecture des signes” (76). The work of Sarraute, which evidently precedes this presupposition, nonetheless demonstrates an acute realization of the same principle and it tends towards this undecidability as the sole source of remedy for commodified language.  

What may appear as “reckless profusion” (Besser 154) is in fact systematic:

[Sarraute] encircles […] meaning without targeting it directly and rendering it lifeless. The text proceeds in the form of circumlocutions, clusters of diverse qualifications, swarms of metaphors and near-synonymous approximations that surreptitiously close in upon the sense of what Sarraute is saying. (Besser 153)

In this obvious questioning of linearity of expression, marked by what C. Blanche-Benveniste termed as “l’effet de ‘piétinement’” (qtd. in Bikialo 95), Sarraute strives for undecidability through “[l]a nomination complexe, de couplages où le dire est partagé en deux ou plusieurs nominations sans hiérarchie” (86). This emphasis on non-linear and non-hierarchical expression which would probably pass unnoticed in everyday life but which we observe through the powerful magnifier of Sarraute’s writing” (“Structures” 192).

122 This propensity towards abstraction, decomposition and expansion has been remarked by many. Claude Régy, for example, points out that le non-dit is expressed in Sarraute’s plays “par la métaphore et par la suspension” (qtd. in Rykner 149). Bikialo qualifies Sarraute’s writing as “écriture de l’entre-deux, de l’écart” (86), namely between the sensation and the words, or as “[l’écriture] de la nomination multiple” (86), a term borrowed from J. Authier-Revuz. Rachel Boué, in a section entitled “L’art de l’indécision”, sees the effectiveness of Sarraute’s writing in its ability to retain the meaning at the edge of the words: “La sensorialité diffuse ne peut, en effet, être saisie que si elle reste à la lisière des mots, laissée ainsi à l’indétermination radicale qui, seule, assure la marque de la pulsation vitale […].” (29).
brings us to an observation of what Sarraute herself has said about her writing and more specifically her characters:

Ils veulent à tout prix se maintenir à la surface, parmi leurs paysages familiers, sur la terre ferme depuis longtemps connue et prospectée où ils ont l’habitude de vivre. Si on les entraîne vers le fond, ils se débattent, c’est pour eux une descente aux enfers de l’anomalie, de la folie, ils veulent remonter à la surface. D’où le constant mouvement dans mes pièces, de haut en bas et de bas en haut. (“Le Gant” 1710)

This movement that Sarraute describes, coming from the individual’s depths to the surface of expression in an attempt to articulate a certain tropism – “cet innommable qui vit dans les profondeurs” (1710) – and to oppose it to “les formes habituelles, sécurisantes, des définitions, des catégories de la psychologie traditionnelle, de la morale, qui emprisonnent et neutralisent” (1710), is illustrated by a particular type of “thick description” that can be termed as paradigmatic writing.

Characteristic of Sarraute’s writing, the paradigmatic piling on of words is associative, non-hierarchical and represented simultaneously in a single syntagm thus achieving undecidability. In C’est beau, when the son interacts with his parents, this strategy is elucidated: “Ah toujours les mêmes réflexes de défense (1), les mêmes échappatoires (2), les mêmes camoufllages (3)… Pour tromper qui? ” (C’est 1453). As previously mentioned and as demonstrated again by the above example, the assemblage of terms is not a simple chain of synonyms but rather, the words are linked by more minute and contingent, metonymic connections since “échappatoires” is not just another way to say “défense” and neither can it be substituted with “camouflages”, but both “échappatoires” and “camouflages” could be part of “défense” for example. The same can be said of the following lines where – the words are no longer coming from the son – it is the mother who tries to be a semi-unconscious Sarruean porte-parole by imitating the son’s discourse in expressing her outrage against the father:

Il y avait là une outrance (1), une crispation (2)… […] et malgré ça (1), malgré le courant (2), le vent si violent (3)… tu t’es cramponné… […] J’avais envie de me boucher les oreilles (1), de me cacher123 (2), loin de toi, j’étais prête à renier (3)… (C’est 1455)

Instead of providing a limited description of her husband’s actions and simply stating that his outrageous behaviour has made her feel ashamed, the mother tries to simulate ‘une expression à contre-courant’ – initiated by her son – that simultaneously resists ‘l’expression courante’. She

123 Le Fils : […] Elle a envie de se boucher les oreilles… de se cacher… (C’est 1454).
avoids using synonyms and instead paints a more abstract and yet a more detailed picture of her husband’s actions. By creating metonymic parallels between ‘excessiveness’ and ‘tension’, the ‘current’ and the ‘strong wind’, the desire to ‘plug her ears’, to ‘hide’ and to ‘renounce’, the wife is able to achieve an expression that is like an incomplete puzzle; even though one knows what the bigger picture looks like from the pieces that have already been put into place, the little details that are still missing here and there impede complete coherence and harmony. For example, between ‘excessiveness’ and ‘tension’ one or more pieces could still be missing, leaving it up to our imagination to fill in the gaps.

Through this preeminence of metonymy in the paradigmatic writing of Sarraute, not only a certain decentrement is achieved but also there is evidence of what the father was wondering about, ironically in reference to his son: “[...] s’il n’y avait pas là, peut-être, un certain manque de quelque chose...” (C’est 1464). While in regards to his son, nothing is missing, a certain lack is in fact present in the paradigmatic writing itself. According to one critic, Sarraute’s writing

[…] se caractérise par la présence d’un certain nombre de formes de détour de la dénomination soulignant le caractère informe, indéfinissable du référent. Il y a désignation plus que dénomination, cette désignation s’effectuant au moyen d’approximation, […] de comparaisons voire de formes du manque, du creux comme les points de suspension. (Bikialo 90-91)

And not only is it through lack that the ideas are represented but it is also the lack itself that becomes apparent through this undecidability since “la nomination multiple […] opère un mouvement de différenciation tendant à signifier le manque” (95). Bikialo consequently notes the “prééminence du signifiant” (96) associated with Sarraute’s writing.124 The metonymic profusion that leaves things out, indicating that there is still something more, and the emphasis on this lack through the chain of transitions from one signifier to another cannot fail to evoke Lacan’s reflection on this subject. In the chapter entitled “L’instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud”, Lacan tries to show that “il n’est aucune signification qui se soutient sinon du renvoi à une autre signification” (498). By demonstrating “[l]a notion d’un glissement incessant du signifié sous le signifiant” (502) “[dans une] frénésie mimant le gouffre de l’infini” (518), Lacan asserts that this metonymic structure “indiqu[e] que c’est la connexion du signifiant au signifiant, qui permet l’élision par quoi le signifiant installe le

124 This notion is further affirmed by Rachel Boué who rearticulates the term “tremblement esthétique” (31), coined by A. Clayton, to refer specifically to “[c]ette recherche du ‘mouvement incessant’ [qui] conduit à bouleverser la structure linéaire et la fonction énonciative du langage [et qui] s’appuie […] sur le déplacement, d’un signifiant à l’autre, sur une matrice langagière qui évite le sens définitif” (31).
manque de l’être dans la relation d’objet, en se servant de la valeur de renvoi de la signification pour l’investir du désir visant ce manque qu’il supporte” (515). To simplify this, it suffices to say that “le désir est une métonymie” (528) and that we are consequently “éternellement tendus vers le désir d’autre chose” (518).

This long trajectory from accumulation and thick description, through decentrement of paradigmatic writing and metonymic lack, culminating in ceaseless fluctuation of desire has a two-fold intention. First of all, it is meant to illustrate that the aesthetic of undecidability is essential to Sarraute’s strategy of restoration and reconstruction of language. Instead of confining expression to a simplified, cliché form, Sarraute favours profusion that can potentially go on forever, implying, correcting and rephrasing a single idea in many different ways, as can be seen in the response of the son to his father: “Ah voilà, c’est contagieux (1), ça te prend (2) aussi. Tu l’as senti (1)… tu recules (2). Tu n’oses pas (3). Le mot te reste dans la gorge (1)… […] Impossible (2), hein? tu ne peux pas (3)… 125 ” (C’est 1454). The uncertainty and the multiplicity are thus the milestones of new expression.126 Secondly, through this subtle relationship between metonymy and desire, Sarraute also succeeds in critiquing the state of the contemporary society that is invaded by the ever-mutating desire (the same kind of desire as alluded to in Tu ne t’aimes pas and elucidated by the theoretic framework of René Girard).127 Thus, to use the words of Jacques Rancière, “l’artiste est à la fois l’archiviste de la vie collective et le collectionneur” (78). This is in fact so when it comes to Sarraute. She accumulates inventories of words to create verbal undecidability and she simultaneously critiques the same state of undecidability in the social

125 According to Rachel Boué, “[l]es points de suspension, ponctuant la ligne phrastique de pauses silencieuses, et ébranlant la logique discursive par d’incessantes hésitations, viennent soutenir cette esthétique de l’inachevé, qui préserve le langage de la stérilité d’un sens trop plein et trop clair” (30-31).

126 Interestingly enough, other than to mock his son, the only other time the father has recourse to the piling on of expressions is when he is confused and facing incomprehension; for him, only uncertainty calls for verbal undecidability: “Toute cette comédie (1)… […] Ces extases dès que tu le sentais remuer (2)… Ces airs béats (3)… Tout était faux! …” (C’est 1457).

127 In his essay “The Genealogy of Advertising”, Pasi Falk explains that since desire has unlimited character, each “‘good object’ […] in one way or another promises to fill in the ‘empty space’ that consumers feel is there, even though they do not know how to name it” (188). He specifies:

If hunger were plain hunger and bread just plain bread, then the whole problem of anonymity wouldn’t even exist. […] However, a fundamental thesis of modern advertising is that ‘bread is not only bread’, which necessarily means that the same applies to the other side of the equation: ‘hunger is not only hunger’. In other words, both are (also) something else and more; but what? This leads us inevitably to the problem of namelessness […]. (Falk 188)

This nameless, endless desire, is consequently filled through naming – branding and advertising, hence reducing the complexity of the modern lack to a simple solution of labeling, both literally and figuratively.
realm, a strategy that can be as problematic as it is powerful. What is amazing about Sarraute’s plays is that they completely break with the theatrical confines, or as Claude Régy has put it, “les œuvres dramatiques de Sarraute sont intéressantes dans la mesure où elles nous proposent pour ainsi dire une destruction totale du ‘théâtre’. Il n’y a pas de ‘théâtre’ chez elle” (qtd. in Rykner 138). Instead of ‘theatre’, what is present in her plays is the micro-elements of life. Therefore, aside from being seen as a writer, Sarraute could be considered a cultural anthropologist who tries to “keep the analysis of symbolic forms […] closely tied […] to concrete social events and occasions, the public world of common life” (Geertz 30). And in that case, her works would become “ideological artifacts128 – ideological because their very configuration arises out of particular social struggles” (Miller 41). Unlike museological artifacts, however, Sarraute’s writing should not be stored behind glass, hidden away from view, preserved as a relic of the past, as her work is not outdated nor cliché and should thus continue to be read for its deconstructive social value and its reconstructed language.

128 A term used by John Miller to describe photographs in a catalogue essay for a photographic art exhibition of Christopher Williams.
Conclusion

Bernard Tschumi, in his article “De -, Dis -, Ex -”, discusses the changes that took place in the domain of urban architecture that was originally based on “solidity, firmness, structure, hierarchy” but began to disintegrate in the 20th century (262): “Relativity, quantum theory, the uncertainty principle: the shakeup occurred not only in physics […] but also in philosophy, in the social sciences, in economics.” (262). He suggests that “[t]he dominant history of architecture, which is a history of the signified, has to be revised, at a time when there is no longer a normative rule, a cause-and-effect relationship between a form and a function, between a signifier and its signified: only a deregulation of meaning” (265). It is not only architectural history that needs to be reconsidered, however, but on a broader scale, the social, cultural and literary history.129

The disorienting postmodern age described by Tschumi, our age, is summed up in the expression L’Ère de soupçon, the title of Sarraute’s volume of critical essays published in 1956. The soupçon can be taken to mean both “mistrust” and “minimal quantity”, to reflect the social poverty of our times. As a visible trace of this suspicion, the aesthetic of undecidability pervades the social landscape and infiltrates Sarraute’s writing from inside out and from outside inwards: from Klee’s play with visual perceptions and Calder’s mobiles to Sarraute’s insistence that individuals are dynamic and complex entities whose expression is plurivocal and multifaceted. It is clear why Arnaud Rykner has said that “l’œuvre sarautienne [est] un univers dont l’équilibre est constamment menacé” (100). In other words, her writing is a terrain that is never stable.

Paradoxically, Sarraute reinstates equilibrium through deregulation and disequilibrium of her own making. Having completed a thorough examination of this Sarrautian démarche in two of her works, we can now provide an answer to a question posed by Raylene Ramsay in her article “The Unself-Loving Woman in Nathalie Sarraute's Tu ne t’aimes pas”: “Is her [Sarraute’s] work not a more self-aware, finely wrought approach to the human psyche and to more fluid, mobile, ways of re-writing the old words and the arbitrary divisions of the old worlds?” (800).

129 “[…] we have entered the age of deregulation […]. We witness the separation of people and language, the decentering of the subject […], the complete decentering of society. Ex-centric, dis-integrated, dis-located, disjuncted, deconstructed, dismantled, disassociated, discontinuous, deregulated… DIS-, DE-, EX-. These are the prefixes of today. Not post-, neo-, or pre-.” (Tschumi 267).
Sarraute manages to rewrite skillfully both the individual and language within the social realm. Despite the constant emphasis of many studies on Sarrautean use of tropisms and visual imagery, the contextualization of her work is indispensable to understanding it. This negligence in regards to the context in the majority of the literary analysis focusing on her work is disconcerting, since much of her writing emerged at the time when postmodern dissolution produced an absence of a controlling point of view, an ever increasing divorce between words and things, as well as the impossibility of articulating a unified self. With this omission in mind, I have attempted to reconstruct the original context and to demonstrate how Nathalie Sarraute resists consumer society in two of her works.

In the study of _Tu ne t'aimes pas_, I explored how Sarraute privileges the polyvalent, the plurivocal and the ambiguously multilayered individual over the stereotypical model who enacts prefabricated norms. We also have seen how through a close study of self-love she critiques the prevailing social order. These selfless individuals whom Sarraute endows with authoritative expression in her novel are representative of the margins, but they are not set there permanently. Endowed with fluidity and movement, the Inconsumables are free to morph and imperceptibly transgress socially imposed boundaries, infiltrating into the social sphere and through their unique character, which is often exaggeratedly clownesque, revealing the inauthenticity of the Consumables.\(^\text{130}\) Undecidability is personified by the Inconsumables through whom Sarraute shows that the multiplicity of selves is more authentic than and preferable to the unified self, an idea that had already germinated much earlier in her nonfiction prose:

> Le temps était bien passé où Proust avait pu oser croire qu’‘en poussant son impression aussi loin que le permettrait son pouvoir de pénétration’ (il pourrait) ‘essayer d’aller jusqu’à ce fond extrême où gît la vérité, l’univers réel, notre impression authentique’. Chacun savait bien maintenant, instruit par des déceptions successives, qu’il n’y a pas d’extrême fond. ‘Notre impression authentique’ s’était révélée comme étant à fonds multiples; et ces fonds s’étageaient à l’infini. (_L’Ère_ 1557-1558)

Another crucial point to make about these authentic individuals is that the multifaceted and unlimited character they expound is the result of internal focalization.\(^\text{131}\) What this means is that in order to be an Inconsumable, one has to reflect and become aware of oneself and one’s

---

\(^\text{130}\) As Jean-Paul Sartre has put it, in the preface to _Portrait d’un inconnu_, “en laissant deviner une authenticité insaisissable, en montrant ce va-et-vient incessant du particulier au général, en s’attachant à peindre le monde rassurant et désolé de l’inauthentique, elle [Sarraute] a mis au point une technique qui permet d’atteindre, par-delà le psychologique, la réalité humaine, dans son _existence_ même” (Œuvres 39).

\(^\text{131}\) As Emer O’Beirne points out in her article “The Self and Language: Authenticity and Convention”, “Sarraute locates the truth of the self in consciousness rather than in the unconscious” (107).
surroundings instead of being unconsciously guided by the tropes of advertising endemic to consumer society. This juxtaposition of the internal versus the external is paramount to the formation of both the self and society, since “dans quelque culture que ce soit, le mode d’organisation de la relation au corps reflète le mode d’organisation de la relation aux choses et celui des relations sociales” (Baudrillard 200). If the external method of self-construction is chosen, then the body becomes both capital and fetish (200) equivalent to any other product that can be exchanged, purchased, devalued. The only way to avoid this dehumanizing spectacle is through undecidability, which comes from within and is a true representation of our endlessly varying nature.

Undecidability, explicit in the unformulable identity of those who do not love themselves, is also evident in their constant vacillation between love and hate towards the ones who love themselves. This tendency is an excellent example of what Jacques Rancière refers to as “le jeu […] [qui] marque le suspens de la signification” (75). The idea of the ambiguous game is also apparent in the use of fairytales and in the clownsque manifestations of the Inconsumables. The fairytale references at once throw off balance generic specificity and give the writing a mischievous quality, positioning it on the side of ironic and critical discourse.132 Through this ceaseless emphasis on the unclear, the changing and the decentred in two of her works, Sarraute demonstrates what Boblet describes as “le tournant moderne du roman vers le roman du scepticisme et du dialogisme. Une nouvelle réalité, celle de l’espace mental d’un sujet ouvert au doute et à l’altérité sera le terrain d’élection du roman d’après 1950” (Le Roman dialogué 55). It is such doubt which fosters a dialogue, a discussion and a progression that provides critical perspectives on consumer society, or in anthropological terms, an interpretation of our culture.

Clifford Geertz’ description of anthropological work, in his book The Interpretation of Cultures, is pertinent to Sarraute’s writing on many levels:

[…] the anthropologist characteristically approaches […] broader interpretations and more abstract analyses from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters. He confronts the same grand realities that others – historians, economists, political scientists, sociologists – confront in more fateful settings: Power, Change, Faith, Oppression, Work, Passion, Authority, Beauty, Violence, Love, Prestige; but he confronts them in contexts obscure enough […] to take the capital letters off them. (Geertz 21)

132 The fact that Sarraute abolishes all frontiers and blurs the boundaries between literary genres such as the novel, critical writing and theatre, has been noted by many. Among them, Valérie Minogue evokes an image of the Trojan horse recently proposed by Monique Wittig to describe Sarraute’s writing as it enters “dans l’enceinte littéraire pour mieux accomplir sa tâche de destruction et de renouvellement” (“Le Cheval de Troie” 151).
This is the exact approach taken by Sarraute in *Tu ne t’aimes pas* as well as in *C’est beau*. She penetrates obscurity, namely the inner-selves and their *sous-conversations*, examining minute tropismal fluctuations caused by barely perceptible, everyday expressions. In *Tu ne t’aimes pas*, the idea of happiness is attacked and dethroned, while in *C’est beau* the concept of beauty receives a decisive blow to its timeless status. While anthropologically this transition from particular examination to general conclusions about cultural state could be problematic, Sarraute passes effortlessly and effectively “from a collection of ethnographic miniatures […] to wall-sized culturescapes of the nation, the epoch, the continent, […] the civilization” (Geertz 21).

This pointillist method of social painting echoes its infinite nature, which is appropriate, since “[c]ultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete […] and […] the more deeply it goes the less complete it is” (29). In other words, although Sarraute plumbs the depths of human consciousness, she succeeds in revealing only some aspects nested amidst endless possibilities.\(^ {133} \)

In *C’est beau*, as in *Tu ne t’aimes pas*, there is no clear resolution to the proposed conflict; hence the discussion is sustained throughout the book. In my analysis of the play, I demonstrated Sarraute’s deconstruction of clichés and her strategic reinvention of expression which seeks to capture the breadth of nuances and implications engendered in a particular sensation. Vicariously, one also glimpses a critique of consumer society, its role in the commodification of culture, in general, and art, in particular.\(^ {134} \)

Similarly to her approach in *Tu ne t’aimes pas*, Sarraute once again speaks out against the singular simplifications and in favour of uncertain multiplicity, highlighting that it is “notre logique sociale qui nous condamne à une pénurie luxueuse et spectaculaire” (Baudrillard 92). It is only natural that Sarraute was always weary of simplification, since she could tell that beneath simple words, lies emptiness (reminiscent of the individual lack associated with the Consumables) along with some significant hidden sub-texts. This Sarrautean approach can be summarized as “[c]e passage de l’unité à la pluralité [qui] est aussi un passage de la simplicité à la complexité, à la non-maîtrise du sujet dont la centralité et la souveraineté sont mises en cause” (*Le Roman dialogué* 325).

---

\(^ {133} \) Such an incomplete portrait of society is not a problem however as “[a]nthropology, or at least interpretive anthropology, is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. […] [m]onologues are of little value here, because there are no conclusions to be reported; there is merely a discussion to be sustained” (Geertz 29).

\(^ {134} \) According to Jean Pierrot, *C’est beau* provides “une réflexion sur l’évolution contemporaine du marché de l’art, et l’entrée de plus en plus massive de l’œuvre d’art dans le circuit de la marchandise et de la spéculation” (457).
In her seemingly uneventful and banal play, Sarraute challenges the social manipulation of language. By saturating her text with clichés and platitudes, she does not simply seek to create a realistic performance. Instead, Sarraute sees simplified language as a symptom of social behaviour. She brings awareness to the meaninglessness of everyday exchanges and critiques their insincerity through thick description. As an ethnographer, she tries to rescue the “non-dit” as well as the real meaning of what is said by “tracing the curve of a social discourse [and] fixing it into an inspectable form” (Geertz 19). By subtly acknowledging the lie packed within the expression “C’est beau”, Sarraute stages the fact that even the simplest expression is never innocent and that it can speak at length about the individual who employs it and the society which reinforces such discourse.

Since for Sarraute “[l’] univers du stéréotype […] c’est bien avant tout ce monde stable, heureux, où tout le monde peut se retrouver, vivre en harmonie et communier autour de références simples et claires” (Goulet 193), this stable world needs to be shaken up in order to be balanced. This is both symbolically and literally portrayed through the destabilization of the figure of the father who frames the play by beginning and ending the dialogue. Like the overarching socially instilled discourse which is ubiquitous, the father prevails in a cyclical fashion. He creates a discursive loop from which there seems to be no escape; the only way out is through a fluid language medium that disorients and destructs and thus has a chance of evading social boundaries or even overthrowing them.135

The paradigmatic writing, which alludes to the need for approximation and layering in authentic communication, also brings awareness of the concept of the metonymic lack long associated with the functioning of consumer society. In this manner, “[l]a polyphonie sarrautienne suppose la réécriture perpétuelle de notre histoire intime et collective” (Jauvin 191). It is through a linguistic reflection of the excesses of her times that Sarraute restores meaning to language and to the individual expression. In a conversation with Jacques Lassalle, Sarraute demonstrates her admiration of language despite its often decrepid state: “Il est de bon ton de dénoncer l’impuissance, le mensonge des mots. Moi, je crois en leur pouvoir. Je crois au langage. Il peut tout dire. Lui seul peut nous révéler à nous-mêmes.” (73). Through her words, we sense that language can be empty, banal, exaggerated, sarcastic, sincere, etc., but its most important quality is that it can be self-reflexive and, thus, language can not only destroy but also revive the individual.

135 “En tant que mode du dire démultiplié, clivé, la multinomination restitue un mouvement d’appropriation du monde par le langage sur le mode du mouvement, du parcours.” (Bikialo 90).
As part of the general approach of this thesis, the ambiguity of *Tu ne t’aimes pas* needs to be reiterated. The reader is constantly perplexed and asking questions: Who is really speaking? How many voices are there? Are they male or female? Is it all one and the same person? The difficulties encountered in the process of interpreting and distinguishing the Consumables and the Inconsumables in *Tu ne t’aimes pas*, which could potentially impede understanding, can also be seen as essential conductors of meaning. This is shown in Sarraute’s reflection on her novel:

> Quant à ceux qui s’aiment ils ne sont pas conçus comme des personnages, mais dans la mesure où ils s’aident, on montre ce qui est propre à ceux qui s’aiment et qu’ils s’aiment pour telle ou telle raison. Ce qui est important c’est non qu’ils apparaissent en tant que personnages mais en tant que diverses manifestations de l’amour de soi. (“Le Déambulatoire” 7)

This statement, which attests at once to the absence of real characters in the novel and to the need for distinction between those who love themselves and those who do not, alludes to the fact that the various manifestations of self-love are like advertising images, custom-made to attract different people. Overall, reading this text is like getting lost in a labyrinth, but analyzing it is much less like a maze, since there are so many possible interpretations. Thus, my conception of the text is just one of many, leaving a plethora of other options open.

Nonetheless, even within this limited scope, I believe that my thesis has succeeded in finding textual analogy to what Sarraute articulated in the act of writing itself. It has always been considered that the movement of the Nouveau Roman, with which she was associated, was primarily a resistance to the tradition of the *roman réaliste*, popular in the nineteenth century and represented by the writing of Balzac among others. What is particularly interesting about this phenomenon is the fact that these realist novels, which were easy and enjoyable to read, have become the real objects of consumption. So in a way, resistance against the realist style of writing is also resistance against the popular interest it has gained, becoming a “thing” of mass culture.

Not only did Sarraute reject the realist tendency, she also gave up the success that the former could have brought her. She did not gain recognition as a prominent writer until the publication of her fourth novel *Les Fruits d’or* in 1963, more than 30 years after she began writing. But even with the critical acclaim of this work, Sarraute largely remained a marginal author, often criticized for her elitist and intellectual writing. Her work has had a narrow reception in the literary world. She managed to remain unrecognized while at the same time being influential! Through her emphasis on undecidability, Sarraute subverted traditional genres
and criticized the consumer society that reinforced them. In her own words, she put it this way: “Le soupçon […] est en train de détruire le personnage et tout l’appareil désuet qui assurait sa puissance […].” (L’Ère 1587).

Sarraute can thus be seen as an ethnographer or, since she denies any desire of being ‘une écrivaine engagée’, perhaps one could say that she is like ‘a critical artist’[^136] “[qui] se propose de donner conscience des mécanismes de la domination pour changer le spectateur en acteur conscient de la transformation du monde” (Rancière 65). In words of Jacques Rancière, “[l’] art critique […] joue sur l’union et sur la tension des politiques esthétiques” (69) and in this juggling, it is undecidability which emerges as the focal point of discussion and subverts the stable system of consumption.

This study of Sarraute’s work is also significant in terms of its broader implications for the entire Nouveau Roman movement. It is worth noting this movement was at first referred to as *Nouveau Réalisme* (Saporta 20) and in the case of Sarraute, this name can be easily justified, since her writing is not disconnected from social reality, but rather rooted in it. The difference from the earlier realist movement is that the reality was no longer the same and thus its expression had to be changed as well. The earlier name for the movement could provide a new direction for the study of those novels which have in many cases been considered for their radical formal qualities and anti-novelistic tendencies rather than the social aspects alluded to within.

Why should we continue to care about what Sarraute has written more than 20 years ago? The reasons are multiple, but here is one solid example. Individual “digital branding” has become part of our social landscape since the late 1990s. This concept is clearly elucidated, for those who are not yet acquainted with it, by its founder, Tom Peters, in his essay “The Brand Called You”: “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.” (1). We have progressed from the Consumables who wanted to be associated with a particular brand, model or style to branding ourselves. This transition is also evident in many personal digital technologies and social media popular today: YouTube, iPhone, iPod, iTunes. The revolution has come to its penultimate point, with the “I”s thinking that they are in complete control of their personal image, while their individualization and ‘differentiation’, in Baudrillardian terms, are simply greater signs of

[^136]: According to Bouchardeau, “[chez Sarraute,] l’intimité n’était qu’une voie d’accès à la peinture d’un domaine plus vaste éclairé comme de l’intérieur par la description des vies minuscules qui prenaient place dans la fresque sociale” (158).
conformism to the consumer culture. Today, Tom Peters, self-defined as “the world’s leading brand when it comes to writing, speaking, or thinking about the new economy” (5), suggests that it is our turn to invent our own brand, as we are “every bit as much a brand as Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop” (2) or the iPod for that matter. This self-branding is a type of self-packaging that supposedly would help us sell our flaws camouflaged into assets and attract even the most reluctant employer with our highly polished personal image. While what Peters advocates is indeed important in what he calls our “Project World” (4), Sarraute’s writing reminds us that we should not lose ourselves in a constant attempt to fabricate a coherent, pre-packaged self. Since a self is plural and limitless, it should not fit into a particular mold or conform to a specific fashion; it is unique in-itself and not through other things.

From an academic perspective, similar issues are addressed by writers such as Philippe Coutant who in his recent Mémoire de recherche for the Université de Nantes entitled Subjectivité et Postmodernité (2008) discusses the transformation of human subjectivity into “la déssubjectivation” (Coutant), largely produced by the effects of consumption and capitalism on language and the individual subject. From a slightly different spectrum, Renaud Camus, in his polemic political essay La Grande Déculturation (2008), speculates on the nature of culture and its meaning, concluding that spreading the culture to the masses, by imposing a hyperdemocratic grid on it, simply annihilates this culture along with the privilege that it once represented. Interestingly enough, both writers use the terms preceded by one of the suffixes proposed by Bernard Tschumi in his earlier cited article “De -, Dis -, Ex -”. It is la déssubjectivation and la déculturation that plague our century to an even greater extent than when Sarraute was writing and these problems need to be constantly kept in mind if we ever hope to find a suitable remedy.

As far as the potential application and future research drawing on the work of the thesis are concerned, I believe the most essential part of the study is the fact that it opens the reader to the reading of uncertainty. In her introductory essay to Elizabeth McIntosh’s painting exhibition, Jenifer Papararo makes a comment on the viewer-response which could be similarly applied to the reader-response: “[…] familiarity doesn’t necessarily translate into understanding [and thus,] [c]onfident movements conceal feelings of doubt, but this doubting isn’t necessarily a problem, maybe it’s exactly where the viewer should be.” (Papararo). Such an interpretation of significance of Sarraute’s writing could provide a new outlet for studying her texts, namely, reception theory could be explored further with the emphasis on the reading of uncertainty. This concept of uncertainty or undecidability is certainly not new and there is a plethora of Sarraute’s
predecessors who could be deemed originators of such a medium. Rancière, in his analysis of the postmodern tendency towards the undecidability, also reiterates that it is not in itself a postmodern phenomenon, but rather it is “la prise de conscience de cette indécidabilité” (84) that defines the new social perspectives. Perhaps it is through the Sarrautean de-construction, dis-placement and ex-fabrication that pre-packaged culture can be mis-placed and un-decidability can bring individuals and language to a less perforated, less destitute and less distant existence.
Works Cited


Valency, Gisèle. “Stéréotypes, narrativité et attribution.” Goulet 63-76.